

No 16.

5 Cents

WIDE AWAKE

A COMPLETE STORY WEEKLY. EVERY WEEK.

SLICKER THAN SILK;
OR, THE SMOOTHEST BOY ALIVE. *By ROB ROY.*



Then the long-suffering farmers lost patience. "Tar and feather him! Lynch him!" they roared, and rushed in for vengeance. Flop! Ted whirled, sitting with his back to the galloping horse's head. "Sorry to leave you!" Ted cried, politely.

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SLICKER THAN SILK

OR,

THE SMOOTHEST BOY ALIVE

By ROB ROY

CHAPTER I.

“SILK ISN’T SLICK AT ALL WITH THAT BOY!”

“Bobo, you’re all I have left in the world. Thank goodness, they can’t get you!”

Charles Dromus, late part proprietor of the Unparalleled Dromus Hippodrome, sat on the stone wall before the little country hotel.

In one hand, by a single long bridle rein, he held tethered the only thing that he owned in the world.

Bobo was a magnificent-looking animal—a true, beautiful circus horse.

Everything belonging to the show had been attached by creditors.

Dromus’s partner, the real head of the “show,” had skipped at the first sign of trouble. Nothing of the firm’s property was left.

“But you’re mine, Bobo, because you belonged to me personally, and not to the firm,” poor, mild-mannered little Dromus explained.

He spoke to the horse as if he knew what he was saying.

Curiously enough, the people in this little town of Prodsburg believed, for the most part, that Dromus’s private property was not liable for the debts of the late firm.

But Dollner, the landlord at the Prodsburg House, was even now in court across the street, with a notion in his head that he could attach that handsome and intelligent horse, Bobo.

“Why, of course you can attach,” explained Justice

Ferrall. “That is, if the circus fellow owes you more than twenty dollars.”

“He owes me seventy-eight dollars and fifty cents,” returned Dollner, warmly.

“Then, wait until I draw up the papers, and we’ll make out that complaint in a hurry,” nodded the judge, reaching for his spectacles. “Dawkins,” to the Constable, “you stay handy until I draw up the writ for you to serve.”

The little country court had adjourned a half an hour ago.

But a boy who had drifted into court simply because the courtroom was a cool, shaded place still remained.

Ted Torrant—no home, no near relatives or friends, no job and possessing mighty little money, had just waked up out of an undisturbed nap.

“Going to put a writ on the poor circus man’s horse, ed?” wondered the boy, with a start. “Whew! It’s a shame to clean a fellow out of his last belongings like that. But, Ted Torrant—attention!”

All of a sudden this boy had waked up very thoroughly. No longer was there anything in the least drowsy or far-away about him.

For Ted was out in the world to get along—somehow. Heretofore, by being too slow, he had not done well.

“This is the one chance I’ve seen in a year!” flashed the boy.

He did not run, but slouched out of the courtroom as if he had just tired of staying there longer.

He was not exactly a handsome boy, this Ted, but he had a good and honest look in his face.

His hair was of a dark brown, his eyes soft brown, his face between ruddy and olive.

He looked like seventeen years of age, which was a few months more than he could rightly claim.

Since his fourteenth year Ted had been an orphan.

Brought up in a small manufacturing town, he had found himself forced to go further afield and become a farmer's boy.

During the last year he had saved a little money. Simply by wearing his old clothes, now well outworn, he had laid by thirty dollars.

But Ted had tired of farming.

He was out to see the world now and to choke a living out of it.

"Work don't pay," Ted had grunted to himself. "I've been working like an Italian—and see what I've got out of it. There must be some easier way of getting along than doing downright hard work. I'm going to find that way."

A week gone. By sleeping out of doors in this fine summer weather, and by buying the commonest kind of food, Ted Torrant had kept all of his capital but two dollars.

Once out of the courtroom, Ted darted down the single flight of stairs, and sped across the street to where Dromus sat looking moodily around him.

"Say, get a move on!" whispered Ted. "Take out your fountain pen and a piece of paper and write a swift bill of sale, passing that horse of yours to me. My name is Edward Torrant. Make the price twenty-five dollars, as that is the biggest amount I can pay."

Dromus, the weak-eyed and slow-minded—the man who had been the "good thing" in the late circus partnership, looked up with a sudden start.

"What you talking about, sonny? Mind wandering?"

"Hurry!" urged Ted, glancing over one shoulder at the little business block opposite in which the courtroom was situated. "Hustle! Dollner, the hotel man, has an attachment out against your horse."

"But the horse is mine. It didn't belong to the firm."

"That makes no difference. Creditors can take the property of either member of a firm. The plain question is, do you want to be cleaned out, without a cent, or do you want to have twenty-five dollars in your pocket?"

"I—I—"

"Then write out the bill of sale, setting the price at twenty-five dollars," broke in Ted Torrant, decisively.

"But—"

"Man, I'm trying to save you! By the time that slow-footed Constable gets downstairs with his paper you'll be without your horse or a cent of money, either. Quick! Write as I dictate."

Though he moved as in a trance, Dromus wrote:

"For twenty-five dollars, paid in hand this date, I sell to Edward Torrant my horse Bobo. CHARLES DROMUS."

"Here's the twenty-five!" throbbed Ted, forcing the

bills into the astonished fellow's hand and almost snatching away the receipt.

"But—hold on!"

"Don't be uneasy," said Ted, reassuringly; "I'll see you through this somehow, old fellow. If I make any good money on this deal you'll get some of it to add to that twenty-five. You wouldn't have got a cent the other way. Sh! Here they come!"

Dollner, looking very happy, and Dawkins, looking very important, came down from the courtroom together.

Three farmers who had been standing together at the curb a little way up the street now joined the pair from the courtroom.

These farmers were named Cramer, Johnson and Petty. They were ordinary, middle-aged farmers, and honest enough, as the world goes.

But these three men were all lovers of horse-flesh. They had got wind that Dollner intended to attach the horse and they were on hand to see whether they could pick up a horse away below market value.

"Stand your ground and don't let 'em bluff you any," urged Ted. "Don't be scared, Mr. Dromus. Let me do the talking if it gets thick."

Dromus still looked on like one dazed. He didn't fully realize yet that he had parted with that handsome animal, though he did realize that under one hand in a pocket he now held twenty-five dollars where a moment before he had held nothing.

The party of five crossed the street.

Constable Dawkins reached out for Bobo's bridle, which Ted now held.

"Dromus," Dawkins began, "I'm sorry to say that I've got to take the horse."

"What have you got to do with this horse, officer?" Ted broke in.

"What have you got to do with it, either, young man?" the Constable shot back at our hero.

But Ted, who had jerked back, still keeping the bridle out of his clutches, shot a bombshell into the legal camp by declaring:

"I have bought the horse and hold the bill of sale!"

"Bill of sale?" snorted Dawkins. "Go away! The horse isn't Dromus's to sell. The court has attached it."

"I haven't seen the court doing any attaching," ventured Ted, coolly, as he fastened the nigh end of the bridle to the bit ring.

"Why, I've got the writ right here in my hand," flushed Dawkins, flourishing his paper.

"Oh, then you mean you were just going to attach the horse?" Ted answered, sweetly. "That's a different thing, you know. That writ gives you the right to attach Dromus's horse—but Dromus hasn't got any horse."

"Oh, stop your clatter," ordered the Constable, angrily. "I'm going to take the horse, anyway."

"Does that writ give you any right to take my horse?" asked Ted, firmly, his eyes glinting out a warning.

"If it's your horse, young man, prove it."

"Easily, by the bill of sale," returned Torrant, flashing the receipt that Dromus had just given him. "That paper was made out and signed, and the money paid, before you got busy for the court. You can't touch my horse, Constable, and if you try it there's going to be trouble."

"Run the boy in now and settle about the horse afterwards," urged Dollner, gruffly.

"Oh, that's your advice, is it?" flashed Ted, wheeling upon the hotel landlord. "Now, see here, all of you! It's easy enough to run me in, and you can take the horse over. But, by the Lord Harry! you'll have a reckoning when you get through. Any outrage that is sprung on me will have to be settled with the lawyer hired by the people who are back of me. Now, are any of you going to take me for a simple, out-of-luck country boy that you can bluff all you please? Officer, this is my horse, and I'm able to prove property. Never mind who I bought it for. I'm going to get on the horse now and ride it away when I please. The fellow who tries to stop me, without just cause, is going to have some mighty tough law to wrestle with, and stands to lose some of his property through damage suits. Now! Anybody want to stop me?"

Ted looked inquiringly around.

As he did so he caught sight of Justice Ferrall, standing a little way back. But that didn't worry our hero any.

Up! He was on Bobo's back.

"Gentlemen, I hope you all understand that this is my horse, don't you?"

"I don't know about it?" began the Constable, growlingly. Then, turning:

"What do you say about it, judge?"

"I never decide cases out of court," replied the justice, warily. "Court's adjourned for to-day. I'll decide anything you want to bring before me in the morning."

"Mr. Dromus," demanded Ted, looking at the late circus man, "you sold me this horse, didn't you?"

"Yep," nodded the weak-eyed man, but he still looked dazed.

"Then I demand that purchase money, or enough of it to settle my bill," roared Dollner.

"There's the wretch now!" yelled a shrill female voice.

A thin, middle-aged, wiry-looking woman, dressed in dingy black and brandishing a battered old umbrella, came around the corner, caught sight of Dromus, and started for him.

"My wife! Oh, Lord!" groaned Dromus, turning white.

In an instant he was streaking it down the street as fast as his legs would carry him.

"Stop that man!" shouted the angry woman, appealing to the by-standers. "He's my husband, and he deserted me!"

"By gracious, judge! That would be a good excuse to nab the fellow," whispered Dawkins, hoarsely.

"No good," contradicted the country justice. "You'll have to wait until to-morrow. Then the woman can come into my court and get a warrant for non-support. By that time," chuckled Justice Ferrall, glancing down the

street after the running man, "by that time Dromus will be in another State if he keeps on running."

"Can't you useless men do nothing?" screamed Mrs. Dromus.

Stiffly the men shook their heads. Mrs. Dromus did not even look at the horse. Plainly she did not know that it had ever belonged to her husband.

"Then I'll catch the wretch myself," she panted, and off down the street she fled after the man, who was just now turning a corner in the distance.

"I want either that horse or the money," growled Dollner to the justice. "Ferrall, what chance have I of getting that horse?"

"None on earth that I can see—outside of court," replied the justice.

"Then I'm dished?"

"I don't want to decide out of court," responded the justice, cautiously; "but I'm just a bit afraid you were a half an hour too slow, Dollner."

Ted, sitting coolly by on Bobo, understood the drift of what was passing.

He smiled pleasantly as Dollner looked around with a glare.

"I'm awfully sorry to interfere with any other plans, gentlemen," Ted broke in, politely. "But I couldn't see a good chance for a trade slip by. So, as you're all agreed that the horse is mine, I'm going off to try the beast a bit."

Though Ted had no saddle, and was mounted bareback, he went away down the street at as pretty a canter as a cowboy could have managed.

"Say, that boy is as slick as silk all right," uttered Justice Ferrall, admiringly.

"Huh!" gruffed Constable Dawkins. "Silk isn't slick at all, compared with that boy. Why, he bought the horse right out from under our noses, Dollner."

Landlord, judge, constable and three farmers walked slowly up the path to the hotel porch.

In the meantime Ted Torrant was off, feeling as if he had made the stroke of his life.

"Beauty! You're just a jim-dandy, Bobo!" gasped the boy, as he turned the animal down a country lane and went on at that pretty canter. "Why, Bobo, old fellow, you're worth every cent of three hundred dollars! Three? Why, by Jove, there are people that'd be glad to give five hundred for you."

The world looked brighter as Ted looked over the sunny fields from the back of that magnificent animal.

"Gracious! Bobo, old fellow, that was a big stroke of business to do in so few minutes. Didn't I scare those people off from bluffing me, though? They took it for granted that I was some stable hand authorized to buy for someone else. Say, Bobo, I suppose I've got to sell you one of these days—but, oh, dear! I wish I had money enough so that I could keep you all the time!"

Jerk! Bobo's front feet came down hard, his hind heels flying up in the air at the same moment.

"You scoundrel!" gritted Ted, in sudden anger.

Now, Bobo was off like a streak of wind.

But Ted Torrant, having kept his seat by sheer good luck, quickly used his strong young arms to rein the handsome brute down to a walk.

Rear-up! Bobo was at his bucking tricks again.

The beast was in an ugly temper, too, if ever an animal had been.

Failing whenever it tried to bolt, the beast stood on its hind legs, threatening to go down backward on its new young owner.

This it varied by a straightforward buck.

Ted, without saddle, and hanging on by his knees and by one hand wound into the animal's mane, was having a tough time in keeping his seat.

"Let's see if we can't fool you?" gritted the boy.

With a sudden strong jerk on the nigh line of the bridle Ted drew Bobo's head around to the left.

But still Ted kept on with the tug, never letting up. So Bobo was forced to turn circle after circle, always to the left.

There in the middle of the country road they went through with this circling until the horse began to wobble under the boy.

"Dizzy, eh, you brute?" growled Ted, and let up on the tug at the nigh rein.

Bobo, delighted to be able to stand still, stood trembling and tamed until the dizziness passed off.

"You confounded brute," ground out exasperated Torrant, "that bucking and rearing trick of yours takes two or three hundred dollars off what you'd otherwise be worth."

It was a blow, but the boy was no longer eager to keep his horse.

And he realized that, while Bobo with a good disposition might be worth five hundred dollars, the brute with these mean tricks would do well to fetch a hundred anywhere.

"Not as big a deal as I thought, you ugly scoundrel!" quivered the boy. "But, anyway, I ought to get some profit out of you. Back to town, Bobo, you ugly rascal, and we'll see if anybody in Prodsburg wants you very badly."

But Bobo, with his recent lesson from a firm, experienced hand, behaved beautifully on the way back into Prodsburg's main street.

With a flourish, Ted Torrant drew up before the curb in front of the Prodsburg House.

Up on the porch Farmers Johnson, Cramer and Petty rose with alacrity. Down they came to the sidewalk, chewing straws thoughtfully and looking over the handsome animal, which, despite its fast canter, did not show the turning of a hair.

"What ye going to do with your nag, son?" asked Farmer Johnson. "Thinking of trading, mebbe?"

There was trade in the air—no mistaking that.

Ted wheeled around on his animal, looking swiftly at all three of the horse-lovers.

"Gentlemen," our hero answered, promptly, "this splendid animal is in the market for anyone who'll pay a right price. What's the offer?"

Then, though he looked calm enough, Ted Torrant began to quiver inside.

It meant worlds to him how his first investment turned out.

CHAPTER II.

TED DOES TOO WELL TO PLEASE THE FARMERS.

"How much did you say ye gave for the beast?" queried Johnson, curiously.

"Why?" challenged Ted, promptly.

"We-ell, that would give a sort of an idea how much ye ought to take."

"Don't you think it," disputed Ted, promptly.

Then, remembering the bluff he had made about someone being "behind" him, he followed up with:

"It wouldn't be safe for me to sell, friends, unless I made a good thing on the trade. I'd hear too quick and hard from the folks that back me in this line."

"Then this is your business, is it? Hoss trading?" asked Johnson, suspiciously.

"Just at present," Ted nodded, and spoke the truth.

"Dunno as I wanter deal with hoss-traders, anyway," grunted Johnson.

"Oh, well, I haven't asked you to," Ted came back smilingly. "Fact is, I didn't believe you'd feel like putting out the money that it'd take to get this animal. It'll only be some swell fellow who wants a real horse that'll appreciate this animal."

"What's the price, anyway?" insisted Johnson, while the other two farmers looked curiously on, chewing at their straws.

"I haven't really an idea yet," Ted answered, slowly. "I'll listen to offers—that's all."

Johnson looked the horse over critically, and with a face that looked as if he didn't exactly like Bobo's appearance.

"Mebbe I'd offer ninety dollars," he hesitated.

"Don't!" objected Torrant, promptly. "It wouldn't do any good."

"If ye want more, mebbe ye'll get it—some day, when the hoss has et its head off," hinted the farmer.

"Would ye take a hundred for the hoss?" asked Cramer, slowly.

"No," said Ted, very promptly. "It's just as I thought, gentlemen; none of you really want an animal like this. You haven't any use for one, anyway. So I'm going over to the Mascot House and put up for the night."

"Why don't ye stop here?" asked Farmer Petty, jerk-

ing a thumb over his shoulder at the Prosbury House. "Dollner'd use ye all right."

"Would he?" smiled Ted, quietly. "I'm afraid Dollner might dream in the night that he had attached my horse. Good afternoon, gentlemen."

"Hold on a second," called Johnson after him.

But Ted rode on at a canter, as if he had not heard.

"If Johnson, or any of the rest of 'em, really want me, they'll look me up at the hotel this evening," wisely uttered the boy.

So he went to the Mascot House, stabled the horse and loafed around on the porch waiting for business to turn up.

Ted's guess was a good one. Within an hour. Farmer Johnson rode up in a buggy hitched to a trim-looking little black mare.

"Howdy, Torrant!" called the farmer, coming up to the porch after he had hitched his own mare.

"Glad to see you again," smiled the boy.

"Yes; just thought I'd like to talk that hoss trade over with ye. Want to take a look at my mare?"

"I saw her when you drove up," Ted replied, indifferently.

"Want to take a little spin behind her?" hinted the farmer.

"Why, what for?"

"Just to see what sort of a critter she is."

"Speak out plainly, man," begged Ted. "Do you mean that you want to talk trade?"

"Thought mebbe I might," answered the farmer, cautiously.

"Oh! I thought perhaps you had already made up your mind about it. But what's the use, Johnson? You don't understand a horse like mine, and you wouldn't pay the price, either."

"Depends on what the price might be," argued Johnson, looking eagerly at the boy. "And also on how I liked your hoss after trying him."

"Trying him?" retorted Ted. "My horse ain't up for any trial. You know the horse as well as I do. It's no use, Mr. Johnson."

"Mebbe it is," persisted the farmer, showing more eagerness just because our hero turned as if he were going inside the hotel. "Tell ye what ye do. Come right down and take a look at my mare. Then I'll name an offer—take it or leave it."

"Oh, I'll go down and look at your mare, if you want," Ted assented, turning slowly. "But I haven't any idea that you and I will do anything, Johnson."

But Ted went down and looked the mare over. He knew horses when he saw them. His eye was as trained as that of a trader or a veterinary.

"Jump in behind me and try a half mile up the street," proposed Johnson. "Handle the lines yourself, too."

Ted accepted. At the farmer's side he put the little mare through a swinging, easy, fast mile.

"That mare's worth two hundred of anybody's money," Johnson glowed.

"I'd say about a hundred," returned Torrant, slowly.

As a matter of fact he placed the mare's value at about a hundred and fifty, and he was satisfied that she was a safe driver at any time.

"Give ye the mare and seventy-five to boot for your beast," proposed Johnson.

"No use," sighed Ted, though he was jumping inwardly. "I knew it wouldn't be."

"Mebbe I'd make it ninety and my mare," urged the eager farmer.

"I'm going up to sit on the porch. If you think you'll lift your figure a good bit, it may be worth your while to come up and sit with me," our hero invited. "But understand that a horse like mine doesn't go at any mark-down sale like you want."

Johnson talked, argued, offered, but Ted looked bored.

Several of the hotel's loungers gathered around them.

"I might as well give it to you straight, Mr. Johnson," Ted explained at last. "You're not offering enough, and, besides, you don't understand my horse. He's too frisky, too nervous and too strong for you. You'd come to trouble handling him."

"I'll handle that hoss, or any other that I ever saw," gruffed the farmer. "And I'll offer you a hundred and twenty-five and my little mare to boot."

It was altogether too good a trade to be refused. But Ted didn't propose to accept too swiftly.

"If we should trade at those figures, Johnson, you'd understand that you were trading without any guarantee as to my horse's disposition. So we'd better drop the idea."

"Oh, I'll take that horse without any guarantee," declared the farmer. "I understand horses all right, even if I do look foolish by paying a top price."

"Can you raise the money easily?"

"Yes, sir. Got it with me," declared the farmer, proudly.

"Well, come inside and I guess we'll make out the papers. But no guarantee, mind you," Ted added, laughingly.

Within ten minutes the money had passed. Johnson was hitching Bobo into his buggy, while Ted was leading the mare, Dolly, back to the hotel stable.

"Dolly, you look like a good, safe animal," whispered the boy, tenderly, as he patted the little mare in the stall. "And—gracious! I've got you and five times as much money as I had this afternoon. Dolly, your new owner's getting slick—sure thing!"

Then, feeling that life had made a swift, good turn in his favor, Ted Torrant strolled into the hotel for his own much-to-be-relished supper.

The porch was deserted when he came out again, but Farmer Cramer sat in a buggy down at the curb.

"Want to talk hoss a bit, Torrant?" called Cramer.

"Sure enough, if there's anything in it," Ted replied, sauntering to the street and eyeing Cramer's sorrel mare.

It was a likely enough looking animal to our hero's quick eye.

"I suppose you know Bobo's gone?" asked Ted, casually.

"Gone, eh?" echoed Cramer. "Sho, no! What do you mean?"

Ted told about the trade that had been made.

Cramer listened, showing a face in which disappointment deepened.

"Johnson was surely in a terrible hurry," he growled.

"How'd you like to trade your mare for mine?" Ted asked.

"Even?" queried Cramer.

"I must have a reputation for being a fool in this town," laughed Ted. "Of course I wouldn't trade even."

"Then I wouldn't be interested."

"I thought not," replied Torrant, and, turning, went back to the Mascot House porch.

But Cramer followed, and sat down. Cramer's sorrel mare was really a good one—a good enough one for anybody—but Ted soon developed the fact that Cramer thought he really wanted that black mare.

At the end of half an hour, during which Cramer did nearly all the bargaining, Cramer took the black mare, leaving the sorrel and thirty dollars in cash behind.

Ted patted his wad almost lovingly, then took it in and left it with the landlord for safekeeping in the office safe.

After that he went out to the stable for another look at sorrel.

"Oh, I'm doing first rate," smiled the boy, contentedly. "I'll keep on doing first rate until I have the hard luck to lose my wad on some old crow-bait that looks like the real thing, but isn't."

He spent the evening on the porch, keeping somewhat apart from the regular loungers there.

About nine o'clock, however, Ted looked down into the street to see a dejected-looking man leading Bobo up to the curb.

It was Johnson. He tied the handsome animal to a hitching post, then came sheepishly up to Ted.

"Torrant, it's no use of my trying to keep that hoss," mumbled the farmer in a low voice.

"What are you going to do?" asked Ted, softly. "Sell?"

"Oh, see here, Torrant, that Bobo is a fearful beast to sell anybody."

"Didn't I tell you as much before the crowd?"

"Yes, you did," Johnson admitted, uneasily. "But I had the brute out for a drive to-night, and she smashed my Sunday buggy so that I'm afraid I can't get it fixed."

"I'm not a wheelright," laughed Ted, coolly.

"See here, Torrant, I want ye to trade back, and I'll leave ye ten dollars to the good," pleaded Johnson.

"You must take me for a plumb fool in business," Ted almost exploded.

"I take ye for a feller that wants to be square in business," retorted Johnson, whiningly.

"I am. I was square. I told you Bobo had a bad disposition, and that if you traded I'd sell without guarantee. You agreed to that, and I took your own offer as to the price."

"But——"

"You're a squealer, Mr. Johnson. That's all that ails you. You want to go back on a bargain of your own forcing."

"Mebbe I'll offer you twenty dollars for a back trade," hinted the farmer.

"Well, in the first place, I haven't got your black mare that you traded to me. I've swapped her for Cramer's sorrel. If you want me to take Bobo off your hands, I'll give you sixty dollars and the sorrel mare for Bobo. But that'll have to be done to-night, and you'll have to nod quick, for I'm going to bed in a very few minutes. The sorrel mare and sixty dollars for Bobo, if you do it at once. But I won't argue or hang around."

Within ten minutes the trade had been made.

Ted slept soundly that night. In the morning he woke up chuckling with the realization of how easily life was coming.

Farmer Petty was already outside. He had a gray gelding, and a very fair one to trade, and he wanted Bobo badly.

"Why, Johnson took Bobo last night," said Ted, honestly. "You don't want an animal that has so much horse in it. It's no beast for a farmer."

As a matter of fact, Petty didn't want that horse for himself. He believed he could keep the animal a while and sell well to some rich horseman.

"You'd be back within an hour, calling me a fakir," objected Ted. "I tell you, it's too good a horse for you to think of driving."

"Huh!" snorted the unconvinced Petty, wounded by the very idea that there was a horse in the world too good for him to handle. "Say, I'll give ye seventy-five and my sorrel for your brute."

"Make it a hundred," proposed Ted, softly, "and I'll go you. But don't come back later and tell me I was right and that you can't handle so much horse."

Within ten minutes Ted Torrant had another hundred in his pocket and a sorrel gelding in the stable.

He was just wondering, a couple of hours later, whether he should buy a saddle or a buggy for the gelding and move on to another town.

But Petty came down the road, his clothes torn, and leading Bobo.

"Ye skinned me," roared the farmer.

"I skinned you?" queried Ted. "How? Didn't I tell you Bobo was too much horse for you? Didn't I refuse to give any guarantee? And didn't I take the precaution to say what I had to say before witnesses?"

"Then I skinned myself," Petty admitted, looking down at the curbstone. "Say, youngster, how'll ye trade back?"

"Petty, if you hadn't been square enough to admit that it was your own fault, I'd have declined to trade for this

brute back again. But you've been rather square in admitting your own fault, so, if you really want to trade, you can have your sorrel back and sixty to boot, in return for Bobo."

"Sixty?" choked Petty. "Why, I gave you a hundred."

"Yes, but you did that of your own free will. I'm doing the same now in offering sixty. I shall be better satisfied, too, if you don't take me up. I'm just paying my bill here and leaving town. Really, I'd rather take the sorrel."

That settled Petty. He took the sixty and the sorrel, and Ted once more led Bobo back to the stall.

"It's hard to lose you, old fellow," smiled Ted, eying the first horse he had ever owned. "I've got you back once more—and a hundred and sixty to boot!"

Feeling as well pleased with himself as he did, Ted took his time about leaving the hotel. But at last he mounted Bobo, bareback, and rode slowly down the main street.

He was soon out of the business part of the village and riding slowly along a rural lane. Bobo, after his larks with the last two buyers, had grown momentarily steady.

"Hullo!" wondered the boy, suddenly. "What's that crowd looking at me for? Why, there's Petty on his sorrel! And Cramer and Johnson there, too. And neighbors of theirs. Why, I believe they must be waiting for me."

Ted could have wheeled and gone back the other way—but not he.

Instead, he rode forward at an easy walk, nodding pleasantly as soon as he was close enough.

"Stop a bit, young man," called Johnson, stiffly, with a surly sneer.

"Waiting to see me?" nodded our hero. "All right, gentlemen. What can I do for you?"

"You can listen to us a minute," roared Johnson. "Then you can hand back the money you've robbed us of."

Ted looked surprised, but made no answer, while the farmer continued, angrily:

"First of all, Torrant, ye came by a hoss crookedly."

"Mistake number one," smiled Ted. "I bought this horse from its owner, and with money that I'd worked hard to save up."

"Now, look a-here," bellowed the farmer, growing redder than ever, "ye traded yer hoss to two of us and traded hosses with three of us. We've been comparin' notes. We've got our hosses back, and you've got yourn. But ye've got a hundred and sixty dollars of our cash that you haint earned."

"If I got any money out of you," smiled Ted, still pleasant and far from losing his patience, "then I got it all in fair and square above-board trades, and you all had your eyes open, and there weren't any false pretenses about it. Now, I ask you fairly, could any business have been run more straight?"

"Business?" gasped Cramer. "Huh!"

All the farmers were crowding closer about the boy, as he sat calmly on Bobo.

All hands were plainly in a hot-tempered mood.

"Business?" sneered Petty. "It was flim-flam!"

"Flim-flam!" repeated Ted, looking astonished. "Why, gentlemen, are any of you green enough to buy gold bricks?"

Then the long-suffering farmers lost patience.

"Tar and feather him, the young cheat!"

"Lynch him!" they roared.

Ted found himself surrounded by the angry crowd as they rushed in for vengeance.

CHAPTER III.

TED PUTS WINGS ON MONEY.

Whack! Bobo started as if shot, leaping forward down the road.

"Catch the bridle!" roared Cramer, trying to force his way forward.

But Bobo was going much too fast.

Flop! Ted whirled around and threw his legs over, sitting with his back to the galloping horse's head.

"Sorry to leave you, gentlemen!" Ted cried, politely.

Then, with a farewell, good-natured wave of his hat, he was off down the road and lost to the view of the maddened men of Prodsburg.

"That's a good town to leave behind," grinned the boy, as, throwing his legs over the horse's back, he turned once more toward his steed's head. "My, but how mad some men will get after they've jobbed themselves by their own smartness. Ted, my boy, if you ever bite off too much in business, take a lesson from those simpletons and be good-natured about it."

Then Ted fell to questioning himself.

Was I tricky? Did I skin 'em?" he asked himself, anxiously. "Now, let's see. I told those folks that Bobo was tricky and high-strung; that he was too much horse for most folks. Yet those men insisted on making trades. And we agreed on the terms after I'd warned 'em. No; I can't see that I've been cheating any. I'm a bit lucky, and that, I suppose, often happens in business."

With that settled, Ted rode on until he came to the next village.

Here he stopped long enough to buy a saddle, a hat and shoes, some good clothes and a natty-looking soft shirt and tie.

"If I don't feel any more respectable, I must look so," muttered the boy, as, mounting into the saddle, he started off again on his travels.

"The world is before us, Bobo, old fellow!" thrilled the boy as he left this second village behind. "And you and I can make a living together; too, old Bobo, or I'm a losing guesser! My, but how good it seems to wear good clothes, travel on your own horse and have money in your pockets!"

At the next town, Bradford, as it was nearly noon, Ted rode up to a neat-looking little hotel, stabled his horse and went into the hotel for dinner.

The meal not being quite ready, Ted went out to a seat on the porch.

Two crafty-looking men in their thirties—men with small, mean-looking eyes and wearing loud clothing and flashy watch chains, took a swift look at the boy from the sidewalk.

They had already seen him ride into the yard on Bobo. Now, they came up the walk to the porch.

"Stranger in town?" asked one of them, with a leer that was meant to be pleasant.

"Stranger to most everything in life," Ted retorted, drily, looking the pair over without liking their looks any better at close range.

The one who had not yet spoken laughed easily.

"Say, you're a slick one, all right, ain't you, youngster. And—"

"Here, you'll have to clear away from here, you fellows!" sounded the landlord's angry voice, as the owner of the hotel stepped outside and glared at the two flashy-looking fellows.

"What's wrong, boss?" asked one of the pair.

"I'm pretty sure that you are," retorted the landlord, firmly. "At all events, I don't want you around here, and I won't have you, either. Git!"

Both of the fellows scowled angrily. But he was a big and husky-looking man, that landlord, and he could summon porters and hostlers to help him if need be.

So the pair turned and slunk away.

"Who are they?" asked Ted, in an undertone.

"Why," explained the landlord, "they're believed to be a pair of crooks that followed and operated in the wake of the Dromus circus. Every circus has a few crooks hanging on after it, you know. Burglars who go through houses when all the folks are off at the show, and pickpockets who go through the crowd, and that sort of thing, you know."

"So they're circus crooks, eh?" asked Ted, looking down the street after the pair.

"Well, the Constables had 'em up before the court here, but couldn't prove enough against 'em," replied the landlord. "But what do you make out of a couple of fellows who answer to such names as Slimey Fettters and Twitch Grundy?"

"Good people to leave alone," smiled Ted. "Thank you for chasing 'em away."

"I'm glad they went, peaceable like," murmured the landlord, letting his voice fall. "There's a poor sick woman dying upstairs, and I don't want no scrimmaging noise around here."

"Poor woman dying?" repeated Ted, his face taking on a saddened look.

"Yes; poor in every sense of the word, too. Hasn't even enough to settle her bill here—not that that matters any," muttered the landlord.

Big and husky fellow though he was, his voice was trembling a bit, and two tears came into his eyes. That made Ted respect the man.

"Is the woman wanting for anything?" Ted asked, quickly.

"For most everything, I reckon," murmured the landlord. "I can't find out; they're too proud to admit their poverty."

"They?"

"The woman has a poor kid daughter with her," replied the landlord.

Ted had money in his pocket, plenty of it, and he knew what it was for.

"See here, landlord," whispered Ted, darting up to his feet, "if there's a woman in this hotel dying, and too poor to pay for her last comforts, you see that she has 'em, and I'll pay for 'em. Understand? Has she a doctor?"

"Lord, no. Not since the first visit. I reckon that took all the poor thing's money, for she never sent out for the medicine that the doctor prescribed."

"Get the doctor here again at once," Ted begged, passing two ten-dollar bills over to his host. "See that she has the medicines and a nurse, too. See that she has whatever she needs. If you need more, I'll furnish it."

"Why, this is mighty good of you," murmured the puzzled landlord.

"No, it isn't," retorted Ted. "No better than it is of you to feel that you don't care whether the poor soul can't pay her bill here. You keep her mind easy on her bill, and I'll help on other things. And shake!"

"Say," murmured the big man, as he grasped Ted's hand and pressed it heartily, "I like your style."

"I like it myself," laughed the boy, lightly. "But now hustle to see the poor soul attended to. And tell her anything you like about where the things are coming from. But don't let the poor soul want for anything, and don't let her refuse what she needs."

When Ted went to luncheon he felt well-pleased with himself. He knew that upstairs, where an unhappy woman lay dying, she was at least being attended by a doctor and a nurse, and that the other things she needed were being supplied.

Then out on the porch again went Ted, and sat drowsing over a newspaper that he had picked up in the hotel office.

Yet hardly had he seated himself when a quick, firm, light step sounded behind him.

Then there flashed into sight a girl, the first glimpse of whom made Ted Torrant drop his paper and scramble to his feet.

"You're Mr. Torrant?" asked this girl.

It was a moment before Ted could summon enough presence of mind to stammer:

"Yes, miss."

About sixteen, she was a rounded, slight little girl, with a great mass of raven hair and eyes that made one think of midnight.

Her face was pale, but beautiful in its softness, while those lips and the dainty white teeth Ted instantly voted were the prettiest he had ever seen.

Though neat to perfection in appearance, she was rather shabbily dressed in black. Shabbiness, however, was a detail that one didn't see all at once in such a girl.

"I am Polly Brethnell," she said, simply, her great black eyes looking full into his.

"I—I am glad to hear it," Ted stammered, reddening, and not knowing what he was saying.

"I asked and learned that it was you who had been so kind to my mother," Polly went on, holding out one of her slim, firm little white hands.

Dick took her hand awkwardly.

"Oh, don't speak about that," he begged. "Who told you, anyway?"

"Mr. Hopkins, the landlord. I made him tell me."

"It's nothing," flushed Dick, still holding her hand. "You see, I—er—er—I've been lucky lately, and I—I want to pass some of the good luck on. I hope your mother will get well quickly."

"She won't. She can't," Polly answered, with a shake of her head, and the tears coming slowly. "She's too ill to get well. But I want to congratulate you, Mr. Torrant, on your kindness of heart and your splendid sympathy for old people in distress."

If Ted was confused and embarrassed, Polly wasn't. She had a message of heartfelt thanks to deliver, and she meant to do it thoroughly.

Then Ted, who was trembling with the admiration he felt for this superb young girl—a thoroughbred, every inch of her—summoned up a great big dash of bravery.

"Miss Brethnell, if your mother is not to get well again, you'll allow me to stand right by you as long as there's anything that I can do, won't you?"

"I don't know how to refuse that," cried the girl, gratefully. "And I don't want to."

"And you'll allow me to advise you about—well, about what you're to do if your mother leaves you?"

Polly looked at him frankly.

"Yes," she said, very distinctly, "if you can arrange my future so that I can take care of myself and repay all you are doing for me in this moment of trouble."

"I'll do that," Ted promised, confidently. "It'll be easier than you think for, too, Miss Brethnell. And now I must not keep you from your mother."

After Polly had hurried back upstairs Ted Torrant became very thoughtful.

"I've taken a heap upon myself," he glowed. "But I don't care. I'm young, and my shoulders are broad—and a girl like Polly Brethnell is worth all the trouble any fellow can take. But, whew! I'm likely to want a heap more money than I've got. Ted, my boy, this is where you have to get out and hustle for all you're worth. You've got to see Bobo go for good this time, I reckon. But what of it? Bobo'll bring a goodish bit of ready cash—and the world's full of chances to make money easy."

Ten minutes later Ted was cantering down a country road on Bobo's back. He was headed for another town. He couldn't even try to make money in a town where such a blossom of girlhood as Polly Brethnell was.

"I only hope I can do something to get Polly Brethnell well started in life," he muttered, as he rode down the lonely country road. "I've only just seen her for the first time, but—gracious!—I'd go through fire and flood to see a happy smile on a face like hers!"

His thoughts of Polly got a sudden abrupt jerk when he saw, standing idly at the side of the road, those two disreputable characters, Slimey Fetters and Twitch Grundy.

They eyed boy and horse curiously as the pair came toward them.

Then Twitch suddenly called:

"Hey, son! That girth's going to come off and throw you."

"Whoa!" Reining up, Ted quickly dismounted and bent under the horse's belly.

But, as he straightened up again, he got a fearful crack on the head

CHAPTER IV.

TWITCH TURNS SLICK, TOO.

Right then and there Ted Torrant saw all the stars he had ever read about.

Down he went, flat on his face, while Twitch, with the club he had hidden behind his back, crouched over him.

"Shall I soak him again?" growled Twitch.

"Better," advised Slimey.

"I dunno as it's necessary," reflected Grundy, aloud. "He seems pretty still. Get up on his horse."

Slimey quickly vaulted into the saddle on Bobo, gathering in the reins.

"Get his wad!" called down Fetters.

"Reckon this is all there is of it," answered Twitch, holding up a thick roll of banknotes that he had taken from one of the boy's pockets.

But he quickly went through our hero's remaining pockets.

"Scoot, Slimey," he advised. "I can keep up tolerable well on foot."

"Going to soak the kid again?"

"Reckon I've done for him already. If I haven't he'll know our style too well, anyway, to follow."

Bobo's hoofs clicked on the road, as Slimey set off at a trot.

Twitch followed along at a brisk pace on foot.

And then Ted Torrant opened his eyes.

He had not been quite stunned by the blow, but he had had the good sense to keep still with men above him who did not hesitate about a little thing like killing for maney.

"Oh, you infernal rascals!" quivered Ted, sitting up

now, just in time to see the last of the circus "razorbacks" as they vanished around a turn in the road ahead.

"I've got to get that horse and the money again, or I'm no good on earth!" quavered the boy, as he leaped to his feet.

He was a bit dizzy when he started off, but his head cleared as he went onward.

"There's the club that hit me," he groused vengefully, as he espied a bludgeon lying in the dusty road.

Snatching it up, he was off again, traveling fast.

"Twitch is on foot, so I ought to be able to catch them," he muttered. "If I don't get 'em my new rise in the world has tumbled. And Polly? Poor little Polly Brethnell!"

His wind seemed almost unfailing now. He covered half a mile without a thought of being winded by his steady run.

"I ought to catch up in a few minutes more," he reflected. "Then I'll have to play foxy."

But he came upon his enemies sooner than he had expected.

Making a turn in the road, Ted came suddenly upon a scene that made him throb.

Slimey lay quite still in the road, just as he had fallen—probably pitched over Bobo's head.

"Whoa, you brute! Still!" Twitch was roaring, as he tried to grab at the bridle of the rearing animal.

Wheel! Bobo turned like a flash, let his hind heels fly, and landed them fearfully in Twitch's abdomen.

Down went Twitch, with a gasp, holding to his belt and white as flour.

"Serves you jolly good and right, you thief!" roared Ted, as he shot past the done-up pair. "Whoa, Bobo! Easy, old fellow! Easy now! Whoa!"

At sound of the voice that he knew well Bobo stopped, wheeled about, hesitated, and stood looking at Torrant.

"Good old Bobo! You know what to do! You can be trusted anywhere! Easy, now, old fellow!"

Bobo still looked uncertain, as if wondering whether to turn and bolt, or stay and let his heels fly once more.

Ted approached, holding the bludgeon behind his back, and not attempting to reach out with the other hand.

So on until he had his shoulder under the sniffing, curious nose of the animal.

"We're all right, ain't we, old fellow?" cooed Ted.

Then, as the handsome beast nosed him, Ted reached up with one hand and took the bridle gently.

It was easy now to lead the animal to a tree and tie him there.

Then, with a friendly pat, Ted left the horse, darting back to where Twitch Grundy lay rolling softly on the ground.

"Oh, oh! I'd rather be dead!" groaned Twitch, in a weak voice.

"You're going to be if you don't do things to suit me," cracked Ted, savagely. "Sit up!"

"Oh, I can't!"

"Then you'll never get up again!" warned Ted, brandishing the cudgel. "I don't love you any, and I'd just as soon crack you on the head as eat. For the last time, sit up."

As Ted brandished the club again, and his eyes flashed, Twitch, still very white from pain and loss of breath, managed to sit up.

Ted stood just behind him, holding the club handy.

"Now, then," young Torrant ordered, almost fiercely, "shell out!"

"Wh-what do you mean?"

"You know well enough! My money! Shell it out, and don't try to turn, or I'll brain you just the way you tried to do to me."

Unable to see Torrant, but knowing that the boy was behind him, meaning business, Twitch began to fumble in his pockets.

"Hurry up!" gruffed Ted.

Now Slimey began to stir, to the extent of trying to sit up.

"Lie down there!" Ted called over to him. "If you don't I'll come over and finish you! Now then, Twitch Grundy, hurry up!"

"Here's the roll," proclaimed the fellow, holding up a wad of banknotes.

"Think I'm going to be fool enough to take your word for it?" sneered our hero. "Count it out on the ground in front of you—and unfold every bill and lay it down flat."

Twitch obeyed, Ted watching him closely, though still managing to keep a corner of one eye on Slimey, who had lain down again.

"Twenty dollars too much," observed Twitch, as he finished counting.

"Correct," nodded Ted. "That's the interest that's been added to the money while you had it, I suppose."

"No; that twenty is my own," contended Twitch.

"You mean a twenty that you stole from someone else than me," Ted corrected, grimly.

"All the same, it ain't yours," protested Grundy.

"Put it in the roll with mine, just the same," ordered Torrant.

"What?" cried Twitch, in amazement. "What's that?"

"You heard just what I said."

"But you—you ain't——"

"Ain't a thief like you?" mocked Ted. "No, that's right enough. But put that other twenty on top of my roll, just the same."

With another big gasp Twitch obeyed.

"Now, roll away from that money, and don't let any of it stick to your clothes as you roll. Remember, I'm watching you. Roll, I say!"

Reluctantly enough Twitch obeyed.

Watching the fellow, Ted stooped down and snatched up the money.

Then he stood eyeing both the crooks, while he held the club ready for business.

"Don't you fall into my path again, either of you," cautioned the boy. "If you do, it'll be yourselves, not me, who gets hurt. Now, in case you want to know what's going to happen to that extra twenty, I'll tell you. At the first town where I stop I shall turn it over to one of the ministers as a contribution from a reformed thief. I hope you'll both take the hint and reform."

Giving the battered and still sick thieves a wide berth as he strode past them, our hero untied and mounted Bobo.

"Good-by," called back Ted. "And make sure that you don't foul me again!"

He was quickly out of their sight, and inside of fifteen minutes he was riding down the main street of Moreton.

It was a pretty little town of three or four thousand inhabitants.

The words "Post-office" caught his eye as he passed the biggest business block on the main street.

"That reminds me," smiled Ted, and reined up.

Going inside, he was about to ask for information as to the churches when his eye fell on a notice posted up relating to a summer festival at the Baptist church.

"Baptist gets it, then," laughed the boy to himself.

Buying a stamped envelope and a sheet of paper, he addressed the envelope to the Baptist clergyman.

Then, on the sheet of paper he wrote:

"Conscience money from a pretty tough thief who may reform one of these days."

"That'll have the parson guessing," smiled Ted, as he folded a twenty-dollar bill inside the sheet, and mailed the whole. "And I've done a good thing for the church, punished Twitch and kept my word. Good business all around."

Mounting again, he rode down the street until he came to what he judged to be the best hotel in the place.

Putting up here, and seeing that Bobo was stabled, Ted sank down on a chair on the porch.

It was in the hottest part of the summer afternoon, and few of the villagers seemed to be out.

"I'll wait until it gets cooler, and then bring Bobo out and look for questions," Ted murmured. "Whee! I hope I make a sale quick, so I can get back with all sorts of good news to Polly Brethnell."

He smiled, then, to think how much this new friend was in his thoughts.

He didn't believe that he was in love with Polly.

"But it makes a fellow feel better in every way to have her around," he told himself. "And it'd always be downright fun to see her happy over anything."

He would have dozed in his chair but for the pain in his head, which kept him awake.

But at last, when it was nearly five o'clock, Ted called to one of the hostlers to bring Bobo around.

Out came the magnificent animal, bridled and saddled, and prancing as if enjoying the thought of a run.

Taking the bridle in his own hands, close to where the driveway crossed the sidewalk, Ted stood looking over his handsome, glossy property.

"Who owns that animal, young man?" called out a middle-aged, prosperous-looking man, stopping close in a buggy.

"I do," Ted answered proudly.

"Private horse?"

"Well, I'm ready to sell, if that's what you mean, when I can get the right kind of price."

"What do you call the right kind of price?" and the man in the buggy stepped down to the ground, hitching his own animal.

Then the horse trade was on in earnest, a crowd gathering around owner and possible buyer.

It began to look like a trade, too, and Ted's hopes ran high.

"You're positive that this horse is really yours, are you?" finally asked the man, looking sharply at our hero.

"Why, of course I am, sir."

"I'm not so sure that the boy does own the horse, Mr. Brownell," broke in a strange voice.

Ted turned to look at the short, stout man who was pushing his way through the crowd. A constable's star glistened on the man's vest-front.

Now, just at the edge of the crowd, Ted caught sight of two more men, who had with them Slimey and Twitch.

The pair of crooks had been gathered in on suspicion—that much seemed plain.

"We've got a rather greasy pair back there, Mr. Brownell," went on the constable, edging close to Ted. "And they've just let it out that this boy kinder belongs with them."

"I do?" cried Ted, indignantly. "Yes, I know your prisoners well enough, but I've had nothing more to do with 'em than to escape robbery at their hands. I—"

"Oh, listen to him!" chuckled Slimey. "Ain't that a fine way to turn down pals."

"And I'll bet you never gave any church that twenty dollars that I sent by you!" taunted Twitch.

The horse trade was ruined now. Everybody was interested in the new excitement that had cropped up.

"That twenty of yours, Twitch," clicked Ted, "has gone on its way. I mailed it to the Baptist minister as soon as I reached town."

Everybody now turned to look inquiringly at a clergyman who had joined the crowd.

"Why, bless my soul!" cried the clergyman, in surprise, "I did just receive twenty dollars from some fellow who proclaimed himself a pretty tough thief."

He held out the envelope and its enclosure. The constable took it, looking over it. Then he held the sheet before Ted's eyes.

"You write that?" demanded the officer.

"Yes," Torrant admitted. "I—"

"You catalogued yourself as a thief pretty slick, then! Boy, we'll run you in until we can think about you a bit. And we'll hold that horse until the owner turns up for a look at it."

Ted tried his hardest to explain, but it was no use.

Followed by the jeers of the crowd, he was hustled down into a side street.

Two minutes later he found himself in a cell in the lock-up.

"Going to ride this evening?" called Slimey, mockingly, from a cell just across the corridor.

"Ride?" jeered Twitch, who occupied the cell with Slimey. "Oh, no! Not him! This is the kid's evening at home! He'll stay here and make the time pass pleasant for us."

But Ted Torrant was in no mood for jokes.

For once he could not even look at the pleasant side of things.

"Confound this fearful luck!" he groaned. "There ain't any way in which I can prove that I'm not as big a vagabond as these two wretches! Oh, dear! And poor little Polly!"

CHAPTER V.

A SCHEME WITH A GOLD MINE IN IT?

Breakfast in jail!

Ted munched dismally at a breakfast of bread, tough steak, and coffee.

Through the night he had managed to get some sleep on a hard wooden bench, but he had waked up "bluer" than ever.

For he saw no way of escaping, at least, a sentence for vagrancy.

He had admitted knowing Slimey and Twitch, and had even admitted sending money for Twitch.

Moreover, the police had laughed at his straightforward story of his dealings with the slimy pair.

"Oh, I'm in for a good year of it," he groaned.

He had just one hope. The night before he had gotten one of the constables to mail a letter for him, addressed to Hopkins, the kind-hearted hotel-keeper back in that other town.

"If only Hopkins would come down here and say a good word for me!" murmured the boy, wretchedly. "But he can't, of course. He doesn't know a blessed thing about me, anyway. And if the police should get a line from Prodsburg! Good Lord, that would make me out a vagabond, sure!"

"Visitors to see you!" called a constable, and then Ted heard the sound of steps on the stone floor.

"Hullo, lad!" called a hearty voice, and then its owner halted before the cell door.

"Mr. Hopkins! Then you did come!"

"Did I, lad? By the first train this morning. And I've brought someone else."

Polly, her face very pallid, and her eyes red and strained from weeping, looked in, too.

"You?" gasped Torrant, in delighted wonder. "Oh, thank you!"

Across the corridor, Slimey and Twitch were looking on with all their might.

But Hopkins turned like a flash upon the constable who had brought them there.

"A bully mess you've made of this, officer!" roared the big-hearted hotel man. "Arresting this young man as a vagrant and a suspicious character. Why, this young fellow is one of heaven's own noblemen! A crooked character? Why, he wouldn't know how to do a mean act! Don't I know? And this young lady will bear me out."

"Then you know the boy well?" questioned the constable.

"Know him? Like a book!" declared the landlord recklessly. "Known him long enough to know that there ain't a straighter, better boy in the United States of America! I'd swear to that in any court or church in the land! And you've arrested him as a vagrant!"

Hopkins was plainly a man who went the whole limit when he got started. Ted listened with delight to this strong vouching.

"We didn't arrest him, exactly," broke in the constable. "We held him as a suspicious character—that's all."

"You can release him, then?" insisted Hopkins.

"We'll take the lad upstairs and talk it over."

Click! Back shot the bolt. Slimey and Twitch looked on in speechless rage when they saw the boy taken upstairs.

Within five minutes Ted Torrant was out on the sidewalk, free, and with an order on a stable for Bobo.

"Oh, I can't thank either one of you enough!" glowed the boy.

"And you needn't waste any time trying to, either," retorted Hopkins.

"It was too bad to take you away from your mother," voiced Ted, softly, to Polly.

"Her mother died last night," broke in the landlord. "Miss Brethnell, when she heard the news, thought she could help to pay back the debt of the dead one by going to the rescue of the living."

"Oh, I'm so sorry!" cried Ted, stopping on the sidewalk and pressing Polly's hand gently for an instant.

"I know you are," nodded the girl, her red eyes filling again.

"And that's all we need to say now," Ted added, gently. "Talking can't make bad news sound any better. But you know how I feel, Miss Brethnell."

Polly nodded dumbly.

"Are you coming back to town with us?" asked Mr. Hopkins.

"Not before night, anyway," Ted answered. "I'll try to get over then. But I want just a few words with you, Mr. Hopkins, before you go back on the train."

They left Polly inside the railway station while they walked up and down the platform outside.

"Mr. Hopkins," asked the boy, "of course you've done

everything you could. I know that without asking. But I'm going to ask something else now. Will you attend to everything that needs to be done, go good for the bills, and trust me to settle with you in full? And I can turn some money over to you now."

"Do you mean to pay every one of the girl's bills?" gasped Hopkins.

"Every dollar! And I'm going to see her start right in life, too."

"See here——" began Hopkins, eyeing the boy keenly.

"Stop that!" broke in Ted, sharply. "I'm not going to force myself on Miss Brethnell's friendship a bit. I'm not trying to win her gratitude. I haven't got a soul in the world, and it does me good to think of helping someone else. But I don't want to put myself forward a particle. Mr. Hopkins, whatever I do to give Miss Brethnell a little push forward I want to do right through you. And I'm ready to consult you about every blessed thing that I do. Isn't that straightforward enough to suit you?"

"I believe it is," cried Hopkins, his face breaking into smiles again. "I'm going to trust you, Torrant, and, between us, we'll see that Polly Brethnell doesn't come to harm or hardship."

"That's the bargain," cried Ted, holding out his hand, which the big-hearted inn-keeper pressed. "And now, here's some cash that I can spare just now. To-day I hope to sell Bobo for a good figure, and then I'll hustle over to your place for more plans. Now I'm going to say good-by to Miss Brethnell, and hustle off to get my horse."

Ted had handed Hopkins all the money he had except forty dollars, which he reserved in case it might be needed in a business deal.

Our hero took a hurried but gentle adieu of Polly for a little while, then hastened back up to the main street.

"Mr. Dromus," called the boy, stopping suddenly.

It was the weak-eyed late circus proprietor beyond a doubt.

Dromus looked harassed and "broke." He was both.

"Glad to see you, young man," he admitted. "You got a pretty good bargain out of me the other day. Mebbe you won't mind staking me to a breakfast now. All my stuff's gone."

Ted led the way into the nearest restaurant, and sat beside the ex-circus man while the latter stowed in a big breakfast.

As Dromus ate Ted told of his meeting with Slimey and Twitch.

"I know 'em," nodded Dromus. "A greasy pair!"

"You knew they were following your circus at the time?" asked Ted, in surprise.

"Of course I did."

"And you didn't turn 'em over to the police?"

"Wha'd have been the use of that? Why, there's a lot of razorbacks like them towing along with every circus. When trouble comes, and the cops get too close, the razorbacks just herd in with the regular men of the circus, and the cops can't find a one. Why, lad, the canvasmen

and the other laborers with a show often look after the razorbacks. I don't believe a tent-show ever went out without its outfit of razorbacks. And I can tell you something else. I didn't make a cent out of the razorbacks, but I'm willing to bet that they paid my partner regular toll."

"Toll on what they stole?" demanded Ted.

"Sure enough. And if you went back over the route of our show you'd find out how people's houses had been robbed, and folks' pockets picked. Why, I'll bet you'd find a hundred thousand dollars' worth of rewards offered for stolen property if you went back over the trail that our show passed over."

"Good Lord!" gasped Ted to himself. "That may give me an idea for a scheme! I begin to think I see money."

But aloud he asked:

"Dromus, did you know who any of the razorbacks were with your show?"

"Guess I knew 'em all!" chuckled the late circus-man. "There was Shang Lannigan, a strong-arm; Toss Simpson, a pappy-rouster, and Bob Whitely, the coon stone-getter, and——"

Dromus went on dreamily, listing the razorbacks who had been touring the country with his late show.

"A "strong-arm" is a criminal who relies upon violence for his success; a "pappy-rouster" is a sleek fellow who preys upon old men, generally when they are intoxicated; a "stone-getter" is one who steals diamond scarf-pins and similar jewelry.

There had been at least a dozen of these razorbacks touring the country with the Dromus show.

Now this weak-eyed man told the names of all of them, described them, and gave some details about robberies he had heard that they had committed.

"What happened to all those fellows when your show broke up?" Ted queried, with more eagerness than he cared to show.

"Why, I heard yesterday that they had all tacked on behind the Hymans & Wells show," answered Dromus. "Guess they must be doing well, too, because that's a big show that pulls out the crowd in every town it hits."

"No!" sounded a harsh voice at the door. "You can't buy five cents' worth of stuff here!"

Ted turned—then his eyes flashed.

A boy looking decidedly on his uppers, and with a thin, hunger-pinched face, stood at the open doorway of the restaurant, the proprietor glaring at him.

"Don't say another word, Don Gleason! Don't pay any attention to that fellow!" cried Ted, jumping up. "Hold on a second, and we'll go to some better place!"

Hastily slipping a five-dollar bill in Dromus' hands, Ted hurried to the sidewalk, where he grasped the other boy's hand, squeezing it as if he would crush it.

"Don't say a word, Don, until we get you looking at something to eat," begged Ted.

In a jiffy our hero had his friend in another restaurant, and there a big meal was ordered.

Don was, indeed, a friend—a chum! He and Ted had lived in the same town, up to six months ago, when Don, driven clean to the wall by the ugliness of a stepfather, had been forced into running away.

"Oh, it does sore eyes good to see you again, Don!" Ted cried, after the waiter had been sent away with the order. "But what's happened. You're a strong chap, and never lazy. How did you get down on your luck?"

"Been sick, and in a county hospital," Don replied, soberly. "Just got out day before yesterday, turned out without a cent, of course, and so far a job and I haven't connected. But I'll be all right soon."

"Of course you will!" cried Ted cheerily. "You and I'll connect, right from this hour, old fellow!"

Don brightened up in a way that it did his chum good to see.

Then Ted gave a brief account of his own adventures up to date. It was very brief, indeed, for if Ted was "slick" in one thing more than in others, it was in not talking much about his own doings.

Then he came down to his talk with Dromus that very morning.

"I know," nodded Don. "I'd have thought such things mighty strange once. But I learned a bit at that county hospital. There were two or three crooks there among the patients, and one of them, who told me he was a burglar—porch-climber, he called himself—made the strongest kind of an argument to have me 'go on the road' with him, as he called it."

"But what that fellow Dromus told me—about there being a hundred thousand in rewards offered to recover property stolen by razorbacks with his show—showed me a scheme that's gold-lined," affirmed Ted.

"What's the scheme?" Don asked, curiously.

"See here, Don, you go back over the trail of that show before it busted. Work quietly, but get a list of the robberies and rewards. I'll locate the Hyman & Wells show. From Dromus I got descriptions of all his old razorbacks. Now, each one of these razorbacks works a different kind of crime. So, when we have a list of the crimes, we'll know just about which one committed that crime. We'll get some of those fellows pulled by the police. They'll have to tell where they're hidden or sold the stuff. Don, a good deal of that stuff can be recovered, and we can land the rewards. At the same time, we'll be helping to relieve the country of a bad lot of crooks. Now, isn't there money enough in that scheme if we can work it with enough brains?"

"And sure death for both of us," Don declared. "I've seen enough of these razorbacks, as you call 'em, to know that they'll stick together in wiping off the face of the earth any fellow who gets in their way."

"Some people are hard to kill, though, Don, and I believe you and I are on that list," laughed Ted, coolly. "What do you say, anyway, old boy?"

"Why, I'm in it, if you are, of course!" cried Don Gleason. "Did I ever say no when you said yes?"

The two youngsters shook hands across the table, then went on talking over their new plans.

In the end Ted slipped twenty-five dollars into his chum's hand.

"We're getting down to bed-rock, Don," Torrant murmured, "so you'll want to go as easy as you can on expenses. But if you run low write me at this address, and I'll have more by that time to send you."

Ted gave his chum the address of Mr. Hopkins' hotel.

Then he saw Gleason off at the railway station, Don starting eagerly and at once on his new, strange trail.

Then, at last, Ted went with his police order, and got Bobo out of durance at a livery stable.

Four hours of anxious hustling in the town, however, showed Ted Torrant one thing—that he couldn't hope to dispose of Bobo here.

"It's back to Polly then," mused Ted, as he turned Bobo's head back over the trail of that eventful yesterday. "I can't leave the poor girl alone too long in her terrible trouble. Besides, who knows but Hopkins may be able to find as good a customer as any for Bobo?"

Dick rode along at a brisk canter for a couple of miles.

Then, his face grown serious indeed, he unconsciously allowed the horse to settle down into a walk.

"Great Scott! I've got to be moving!" muttered the boy. "I've got to get rid of this horse, and at a mighty good figure, too! It makes my head swim to think of the debts I've got ahead of me. I've stood good for all Polly's expenses, and I'd sooner die than go back on that. And Don will soon be needing more expense money. And here I've got just a few dollars left in my pocket. Bobo, you sleek, handsome rascal, I've got to make a lot of good money out of you quick, or they'll have me down for a fakir who bites off more than he can pay for!"

No wonder Ted Torrant's face was serious all the rest of that ride!

CHAPTER VI.

THE FIRST STEP IN CRIME.

"Did you ever hear of such luck hitting a fellow all of a sudden?" demanded Ted Torrant, ruefully.

"Oh, you'll come out all right," predicted Hopkins, positively. "You are the kind of youngster that can't help landing on his feet."

"But who'd ever have thought that I could be here a week, with such a horse as Bobo on my hands, and not a single bid worth listening to? And I've ridden off through the country with no better result."

"Someone will come along yet," declared Hopkins.

"I hope so, for your sake."

"Don't worry about me, lad," protested the big-hearted landlord.

"But I do worry. Here my cash is gone, and I've got you stuck for a lot of debts you took up on my account."

And I can't even pay my hotel bill here, and Bobo's eating up his head out in the stable."

"It'll all come out right," smiled Hopkins.

"And my friend that I've got hustling out on the road for me will be sending in any day for expense money."

"Well, maybe I can borrow it somewhere and let you have it," suggested the landlord.

"Say, you don't do anything for people, do you?" cried Ted, remorsefully.

"Well, lad, we don't go through this world but once together, and we might as well do all we can to help each other."

Ted had already discovered that that very kind of spirit had been the business ruin of Hopkins. That landlord had always stood ready to take the money worries of others on his own broad shoulders. Hence it was that, while everyone in town liked Hopkins, that gentleman didn't get along very well and had no money of his own.

The week had been a hard one, after so much success before it.

Ted still had Bobo, but couldn't find anyone who'd pay anything like a decent price for the animal.

Our hero's funds were now down to the price of a few postage stamps.

Polly, who had grown more cheerful, and partially resigned to the loss of her mother, flitted about the hotel.

Ted, in his few leisure hours, had drawn as much comfort from the girl as he had given her in return.

Polly, of course, knew nothing of the state of his affairs. Ted was still as well dressed as ever. The girl believed that her wonderful friend was very prosperous indeed, and she often wondered what the plans were for her own future, which Ted told her he was still working out.

Up to date Polly had been content with the assurance that these plans would enable her to repay him for all that he had undertaken on her account.

"Hullo," cried Hopkins, as the two friends sat on the porch that afternoon, "here comes John Rowley. Headed this way, too."

"I'll fade then," proposed our hero, rising.

"Don't you do anything of the sort. I want you to meet Rowley. He's the right sort to know."

Mr. Rowley was white-haired, and appeared to be past sixty. His appearance was that of a comfortable farmer.

"Wonder if he'd take a shine to Bobo?" mused Ted.

"Nope; he don't take much stock in fancy horses. But you'll like him. Bless me, don't John look worried about something, though?"

"Can I see you alone, Bill?" asked Mr. Rowley, as, after hitching his horse at the curb, he came up to the porch.

"Certainly, John."

The two friends walked off to the further end of the porch, where they talked in low tones.

"Why, John, the very young man you want for that sort of thing is sitting right over there," cried Hopkins, at last.

"Are you sure?" asked the farmer, in a quavering voice.

"Sure? Certain! positive! Torrant, come over here." Ted rose and walked quickly over to the pair.

"Listen to this, Ted, and see what you can say," Hopkins began at once. "John Rowley's boy, Willie, has disappeared, and Rowley doesn't want to ask the police to look him up."

"Why not?" our hero asked.

"Well, for fear the lad is doing something that'd make the police want to keep him if they found him," Hopkins replied, with a grim look.

"I—I am afraid my boy has gone off with—with—loose companions," said the old man, tremblingly.

"In other words," Hopkins went on, "Will Rowley has had, for a long time, a fool notion in his head that he'd shine as a bank-robber, or a train sticker, or some fool thing like that. His father tried to lick the notion out of his head, but that didn't do any good. And now Willie's gone, and stole over a hundred dollars of his dad's money."

"Well, I won't say he stole it," quivered the old man, "since he's my son, and I s'pose my money somehow belongs to him a bit, too."

"He stole it if he didn't ask you for it," retorted Hopkins, briskly. "Don't try to cover up anything, John. If you want this young man to help you he'll have to know just what the story is."

"How old is Will Rowley?" asked Ted, thoughtfully.

"Sixteen," replied the father.

"Is he ugly, vicious, dangerous?"

"He ain't the kind of boy maybe you'd expect at all," snapped Hopkins. "Truth is, Willie's more than half of a foolish boy, but he's got a pesky mean streak in him that—"

"Now, Bill——" pleaded the poor old father.

"I've got to tell the truth, John, because you won't do Willie full justice," Hopkins insisted grimly. "Now, Torrant, Willie has been gone since yesterday afternoon. It's a cinch that he's gone off to join criminals. The question is, what direction did he take, and how far has he gone? Are you willing to try to look for him?"

"Certainly," our hero answered, quickly, "if there's anything in it for my time."

"If I thought you'd stand any show to get my boy back," quavered the old man, "I'd pay your expenses and offer you a reward of five hundred dollars."

"I'll go into that!" clinched Ted, promptly, his eyes shining.

"Got an idea already?" demanded Hopkins, watching his young friend keenly.

"I have."

"What is it?" quivered the old father.

"I'd rather not say, until I've tried it," Ted urged. "But I'll have to start at once."

* * * * *

"Willie, boy, if you're around here you're a hard one to find!"

Ted had been in Bridgetown since half-past three that afternoon.

It was a pretty little manufacturing town, not very heavily populated.

Yet there were people enough in that and two or three adjoining towns to make it worth while for the Hyman & Wells show to play there afternoon and evening.

Ted had shown up at the circus. No Willie boy there, as our hero made sure, for, in his inner coat pocket was a photograph of young William Rowley.

Mixed in with the afternoon crowd at the circus, however, Ted had spotted four men whom he was sure he could name as razor-backs who had formerly followed in the wake of the Dromus show.

He recognized these men by the descriptions Dromus had given of them.

Again, in the early evening, our hero had mixed in with the crowd at the circus. But no Willie Rowley had shown up there.

"If he followed the razor-backs of this show, then, he's out with the strong-arms," thought Ted. "And if I don't find him here I'll follow the show to the next town."

Ted was now out on the road leading to Prentiss Hill, the suburb of Bridgetown where the richest part of the population lived.

Torrant had dropped in behind a clump of lilac bushes that bordered the road.

"Queer how everyone flocks to a circus," murmured Ted, as he glanced up along the hill slope at the many dark houses. "You wouldn't think grown-ups would care enough about it to leave their homes alone. And yet there are always some burglaries in a town when a circus is there. You'd think grown-ups would get wise, and some of 'em stay at home."

It was nine o'clock now, and Ted felt that if Prentiss Hill was to be visited by razorbacks it was about time for them to show up.

And just now two men trudging along the road fell under his gaze.

"Why, they must be Shang Lannigan and Bob Whitely, sure enough!" throbbed the boy, scanning the passers eagerly from behind his screen of branches and leaves. "Yes, sir, that's Shang and Bob, all right! Up to a nice little job, too! I wish I could spoil their game. But I'm after Willie, and no one else, just now!"

The pair had passed on, and had been gone for three full minutes.

Ted, still watching, was wondering what that scoundrelly pair were doing up in some hill house.

But now other sounds came to his ears.

A man and a boy hove into sight.

Ted peered, throbbed, then shivered.

"Willie boy, by all that's wonderful!" he gasped.

The man and the boy were passing within six feet now.

The boy's face was plainly revealed to the hidden young spy.

"Oh, Willie, you chump!" thrilled Ted. "The good

home you've got—and you think it's fine and manly—sporty and brave!—to travel about with thugs like these!"

The pair had passed on, in silence, up the road now.

Ted's first impulse had been to leap out into the road, and stand in the fool-boy's way.

But only a second's reflection had told him that this was a risky plan that would bring about no good result.

These razorback "strong-arms" were desperate fellows.

A pistol ball would be the most likely answer to such interference.

"I'll trail 'em, without being seen—that's the safest thing to do," quivered Ted.

Keeping on the other side of the stone wall, Ted crouched low and followed.

Within five minutes that chase had led into the broad grounds of the finest house on Prentiss Hill.

Behind a row of shrubbery Ted followed the oddly mated pair as they stole silently up to the house.

There was a whispered word between the man and the boy.

Now the boy stole into a clump of syringa bushes by the driveway, while the man of the pair darted up to the broad front porch of the house, disappearing in the shadows near the front door.

Breathing hard, Ted Tarrant stole further forward.

"Gracious! The grown-up is a swift one! He's on the other side of that door already!" throbbed Ted, peering.

Then, with a sudden hard pounding at the heart, our hero ran across the driveway, straight up to the clump of syringas.

"Come out of there, lad," he called, softly, and reached through, laying a hand on a trembling boy's shoulder. "Scoot—with me! I'll get you off to safety in time! Come, the place is going to be jumped by the police!"

"Police!" screamed the youngster, aloud, in his fright.

"Shut up, you little idiot!" whispered Ted, hoarsely, fiercely. "Willie Rowley, hot-foot it hand in hand with me, and get away from here before you're nabbed and sent to prison for half your life! Come! Stop pulling back!"

Ted had dragged the boy out from beyond the bushes.

A very scared-looking young wretch was Willie. His eyes bulged, his teeth chattered.

"Come on!"

"Police! Help!"

Out of the house came the three razorbacks whom Ted had already seen that night.

"Come on, Willie, if you ever want to see home again!" throbbed Ted, and himself turned to run.

But the three men had gotten a good start.

Pursuing, they surrounded Torrant.

Ted halted, at bay. Then they closed in on him on all sides.

Plunk! A black fist struck Ted down from behind.

Then Shang Lannigan, dragging the terrified Willie forward, placed a blackjack in the youngster's hands, pointed to the dazed Ted Tarrant lying there on the grass, and ordered gruffly:

"Make good, kid! Ye've been doin' a heap of bragging. Now, tap that screecher on the head with this blackjack. One good hard hit, and ye're one of us."

Stimulated once more by finding his new pals around him, Willie Rowley clutched at the blackjack, then bent over to follow orders.

CHAPTER VII.

MAKIN' BRAINS PAY.

Trembling, yet determined, a fool boy hastened to fasten himself in the life of the criminal.

"There they are, men! Use your guns, and shoot straight. Kill any man of them who shows fight!"

The gruff order rang out behind a summer-house off on the lawn.

"Cheese it!" yelled Shang, himself setting the example of instant flight.

After him darted the other two razorbacks, all three running zigzag, and widely apart, in order not to present too good a mark for flying bullets.

"Don't shoot unless they fight—but catch 'em!" rang that same gruff, directing voice.

Then out from behind the summer-house came—

Don Gleason, and alone.

Nor did a soul appear behind him, but it was not necessary, for by this time the razorbacks had cleared the wall at the road and were tearing toward.

Willie Rowley had been left behind in the rush.

That wretched young fellow, hearing the shouts, had dropped the blackjack from a hand that shook as if with palsy.

But Don had seen, and now, as the boy rose shakily to his feet, and started to run, Don darted after him.

"Here, you skunk!" growled Gleason, using the same gruff voice that had startled the razorbacks into such swift flight.

He gripped Willie by the collar, yanked him back, slung him down, even kicked him with gusto.

"Oh, don't please!" cried the boy, in pain and terror.

"Oh, yes, please!" mocked Don, yanking Rowley to his feet once more, and sending in a smashing blow over the mouth that loosened two of Willie's teeth.

But now Ted, rousing out of the daze into which that black fist had sent him, sat up and looked around.

"Here, Don—don't!" he called, sharply.

"You bet I will," flared Don. "The little swine was trying to hit you with that stuffed club."

"That's all right," nodded Ted, getting up quickly. "But don't hurt the fellow. We've got other things to do with him. Stop, I say! I came here on purpose to get that boy and take him to his home."

And Ted came over, while Don stood as if petrified with astonishment.

"Willie, aren't you a nice one?" ripped out Ted, scorn-

fully. "Leaving a good home and running around the country with a lot of jail-birds, just to learn their trade."

"Y—you don't know me," stammered the captive, whom Don still gripped hard.

"I'm glad to say I don't know you very well," retorted Ted, disgustedly. "But I know who you are, for I came here to find you. Now, back you go to Dad Rowley by to-night's train!"

"I—I won't go home!" flared Willie, with sudden energy.

"Guess again," snapped Torrant. "You're going home if we have to hammer you every step of the way."

"You can't make me go—you've no right to," raged the boy.

"Right?" sneered Ted. "I like to hear you talk that way—a young rascal who has started off on the course that we caught you on! I suppose you thought you had a right to help those men break into a house?"

"I won't go," sniffed Willie, stubbornly.

"We'll talk about that later. Come on!"

Ted's own fingers took a twist in the youngster's collar. He dragged young Rowley along, Don Gleason following just behind.

"I'll complain of you to the first policeman we meet," raged Willie.

"Two might play at that game," smiled Ted. "Who'd get the worst of it, do you think?"

"Oh, you feel smart, don't you?" quivered Willie.

"I shouldn't think you would!"

"If I was your father," blurted Don, "I don't know what I'd do to you when I heard that you'd started to do up a human being with a thing like this."

And Don held up the blackjack that Willie had dropped.

"I—I wish I had used it!" grated Willie, desperately.

"Oh, you do, eh?" queried Ted, with a grim smile.

"What right have you got to take me along in this fashion?" insisted Willie Rowley.

"Legal right, do you mean?" demanded Ted.

"Yep."

"Well, I guess the best right I have is the fact that your father hired me to bring you home."

"You a detective?" gasped Willie.

"Maybe."

Willie shivered slightly, but he no longer offered any resistance.

Ted was dying to know how it had happened that his chum had shown up at such a lucky time, but he felt that it would be out of place to ask before their young captive.

They were now nearing the more thickly settled part of the town.

"Now, Willie boy," suggested Ted, "pretty soon I've got to let go of your collar. You've got a choice of two things to do then. You can walk along quietly, and stick right with us, and there won't be any trouble. Or you can make a break to get away. If you do we'll catch you

and slam you into the local lock-up on a burglary charge. If you do the first thing you'll get safe home to your father. If you do the second thing your father will have to come to you, and all he can do for you will be to hire a lawyer, who won't be able to keep you out of jail for the next few years. Now, which do you choose to do—go home or go to the lock-up?"

"I don't want to do either," protested the youngster, sullenly.

"It's one or the other—which will you do?" Ted demanded, crisply.

"I—I'll go along with you."

"And you won't try to break away?"

"No."

"Stick to that, or you'll be sorry."

Ted and Don walked on either side of the young wretch, and so escorted him down through the streets to the railway station.

Here Don and Willie waited while Ted went inside for the tickets.

"Train's due here in two minutes," announced Ted, hurrying out. "I'm going back to use the telephone a minute."

In the brief interval before the train came our hero got the local police on a telephone wire.

He gave them the first news they had had of the attempted robbery on Prentiss Hill.

What was more important, Ted gave them accurate descriptions of the razorbacks who had been in the job.

"Who are you?" demanded an eager voice over the telephone.

"Name's Torrant. I'm down at the railway station."

"Come up here at once, and help us."

"Can't. I hear my train coming now. But if you're sharp you can land a tough bunch of criminals. Good-bye."

Ted rang off, darting to the platform, where the train was already coming in.

Willie Rowley was holding back as if he'd like to bolt, but Don had a tight grip on his coat-sleeve.

"Aboard with you," ordered Ted, without ceremony.

The car was not very crowded. Ted chose seats in the middle of the car. Then, as soon as the train was in fast motion he pulled Don into the aisle.

"Don, old fellow, how on earth did you come to be on hand at that lucky moment?"

"Nothing very strange about it," smiled Don. "You hadn't heard from me for the last few days, so you didn't know that I had finished up going over the trail of the old Dromus show. But I had, and so I went further, and followed up the Hyman & Wells. I got into town this afternoon, and made up my mind I'd prowl in the wealthiest part of the place. When I saw that fine big house all dark I picked it out as a place where the razorbacks would be likely to try a job. So I hid in a summer-house to rubber.

I was just about to sneak off and telephone the police when I saw you show up. Then, of course, my work was cut out for me, and I knew what to do."

"If it hadn't been for you," throbbed Ted, "I believe that young scoundrel would have cracked my head open. He was so anxious to have those thieving blacklegs regard him as a man—the young idiot!"

"And how did you come to be on the warpath?" Don quizzed curiously.

So Ted explained it all.

"Oh, that was a lucky thought of yours—that the youngster'd be found with the razorbacks!" throbbed Don.

"In view of what you and I know about the way these razor-backs operate," returned Ted, "it seemed the most likely surmise."

"Well, it did. And so, for a bit of brains like that you're to pull in five hundred dollars!"

"If I get it, Don, it's share and share with you."

"No, it ain't!" Don retorted, swiftly. "Nothing of the sort. If I get anything from you it'll be wages—not divvy."

"Well, we'll argue that later," smiled Ted.

Willie, who was as scared as he was glum, gave them no more trouble.

Late that night Ted, his chum and his prisoner showed up in the office of Hopkins' hotel.

"Why, good gracious, you got the young rascal!" cried Hopkins.

"That's right. Call me names, now I'm down on my luck!" returned Willie, sullenly.

"I'll telephone his father right away," cried the landlord, running to the telephone closet.

In less than twenty minutes John Rowley reached the hotel.

He greeted his boy soberly, but without anger. It was easy enough to see that Willie was to have all the chance he needed to reform.

Then John Rowley showed the manner of man he was by promptly producing the reward he had promised.

Then, the farmer having led his son out to the waiting buggy, Ted and his two friends were left alone.

"Stow this away, Don," Ted requested, counting out a hundred and passing it over.

"Thank you," Don replied. He took out a twenty, passing the rest back.

"That pays me twice as well as I'd be paid at anything else," Don smiled.

"All right, old chap," sighed Ted. "We'll argue that out later. Now, Mr. Hopkins, can I have a little chat aside with you?"

"I'm going up to bed now," smiled Don, "if that will help you any."

In the next half hour Ten and his landlord friend went over all the bills that had been incurred on Polly Brethren's account. Our hero passed over the sum that would settle them all.

"And now my own board bill, and that for the horse," Ted proceeded.

"Stop right there!" snapped Hopkins, growing red. "You haven't any bill here with me, and you can't have. It's worth the little it costs to have a boy as bright, slick, and manly as you are under the roof. I won't take a cent from you, now or at any other time."

"That sort of generosity is the only thing that has kept you from being a rich man," Ted smiled back at him. "You'll have to let me settle my bills here, or I shall move to some other place. Now, see here, Hopkins, you don't want to bring on a quarrel between us."

Grudgingly, this big-hearted fellow took the money that was rightly his.

"Lord, but it does seem good to be rich again, and not owing a cent," grunted Ted Torrant, looking at the very respectable roll—nearly three hundred dollars—that he still had left. "Clear of every debt, and all this cash on hand!"

He wished he could see Polly at once, and make her feel as happy as he was. But that young lady had been upstairs asleep for some time.

They met in the early morning, though, and her delight seemed to be as great as Ted's own.

He introduced her to Don, but that wise chum soon found an excuse to slip away.

"Now, Polly—I beg pardon, Miss Brethnell—"

"No," she smiled back at him promptly. "The first was right. If we are to be really good friends, Ted, then call me by my first name."

"Polly," Ted went on, gratefully, "can't we take a little stroll? I want to talk that future over with you."

"It's quite time," assented Polly, brightly. "You've said so much to me in a vague way about my future. I left it to you to help me decide, but so far I haven't been able to get a wood out of you, Ted, except that you're still thinking about it. Sometimes I have a strong suspicion that you don't know a blessed thing yet about what I'm to do hereafter."

"Polly!" cried Ted, reproachfully.

"Oh, I didn't mean to hurt your feelings," she added, remorsefully.

"You'll always hurt my feelings," laughed the happy boy, "when you even hint that I don't understand all I'm doing—that I'm about the slickest thing on earth, in fact."

They had stepped into the street by this time, and had turned off into a quiet side street.

"Now, what have you decided on—or what do you wish to propose to me?" the girl asked, looking at him so fixedly that Ted, had he had less "nerve," would have been embarrassed.

"Why, the first thing, Polly, is to make you independent."

"I thought that was the whole thing," she retorted, quickly.

"What I mean, Polly, is that you must start in life by feeling that you don't owe anybody anything, and that—"

"But I do owe a lot," cried the girl, looking troubled. "Think of all I must owe you now."

"We're not going to think of that until other matters are attended to," Ted broke in. "You've got to have a decidedly good capital on hand before you're to talk about any settlement with me."

"But I don't understand."

"What puzzles you?"

"How am I to get that capital on hand? I'm not doing anything, and I don't know that I could fill a position if I had one."

She looked into his eyes searchingly, as if demanding a full explanation.

But Ted had no intention of surrendering, or of being hindered in any way.

"Polly," he asked, simply, "do you trust me?"

"What a silly question!" she answered, coloring. "Of course I do. If I didn't Mr. Hopkins would make me feel ashamed of myself. Why, Ted, that man would swear that black was white, if you told him so."

"Would you, Polly?"

It was Ted's turn to look searchingly into her eyes.

"I—I believe I would," she laughed.

"Well, I'm not going to ask you to swear to that, but I'm going to ask you to take my word for a few things."

"You know I will!"

"Then, Polly, I've a half-formed scheme by which you can help me out in some ways, and, by doing so, earn enough to make yourself independent of any other employment."

"You mean that—honestly?" she cried, rather sharply.

"Honestly, Polly. Do you believe me?"

"Yes; I must."

"Now, the first thing you will need, Polly, will be a bank account."

"Perhaps I ought to buy a diamond necklace, too," she laughed merrily. "You know well enough, Ted, that I haven't any money either for diamonds or a bank account."

"You can do without the diamonds—for the present. But the bank account you'll have to have, Polly, if you're to help me. So, as it's in connection with my business, of course I start the bank account. You're to draw against it as the business needs."

"Oh, I'm to be a sort of cashier?" she asked, quickly.

"Yes and no."

"What do you mean by that, Ted?"

"Well, a cashier is accountable for every cent she handles. You're not going to be, Polly. In the first place, in order to help me, you'll have to live comfortably, and dress pretty well."

"But I'm not to draw on the account for those expenses?" protested Polly.

"As long as you're in business for me you'll have to.

You understand, Polly, that you're to live well and look at your best, or you can't help me well enough. And so you are to charge your expenses to the business. As to the salary——”

“Salary?” flashed Polly, indignantly. “I won't talk about that.”

“But, Polly——”

“Stop there, Ted. I may not know much about business, but I know that any girl is lucky who can make her expenses at any kind of work at the start. So, until I know more about the business, and see whether I'm really worth anything, I shan't think of salary.”

“But, Polly——”

“If you say another word, Ted, about salary, I shan't listen to anything that you have to say.”

She looked at him as if she fully meant it

So Ted, with a sigh, passed that point.

“Now we'll walk down to the bank, Polly, and start that independence scheme.”

“Ted!” And she drew back sharply, eyeing him closely.

“Well, little one?”

“What you've been telling me is—is——”

“On the level?” suggested Torrant. “Polly, I assure you that nothing on earth was ever more on the level. If you don't believe me, ask Hopkins. He's my reference.”

“When I can't believe you I won't ask anyone else,” Polly flashed back at him. “But, Ted, an awful suspicion went through my mind that this was all pretense, and that you were taking the easiest way to help me along—as an object of charity!”

“Charity?” repeated Ted, shocked. “Polly, forget that word as quickly as you can. No; I'm going to help you a bit, but you're going to help me a good deal more. This is all business.”

And Ted meant it all. Though he hadn't as yet a ghost of an idea what the business was to be, he was prepared to create one to satisfy this trusting but spirited girl.

So he took her to the bank, and they opened an account for two hundred and twenty-five dollars, the account standing in Polly's name.

“It makes me light-headed,” laughed the girl, uneasily, “to know that I can write checks and that the bank will pay them.”

“You'll get used to it,” Ted predicted, unblushingly.

“I suppose it's an old story to you—signing checks,” said Polly, simply.

And Ted, who had never had a trace of a bank account in his life, nodded without coloring.

“I've got to go out of town in a few minutes, Polly,” he went on, as they strolled back to the hotel. “But—but—well, you won't mind a friend like me speaking about it, will you? You know, one of your duties will be to look at your best.”

“I understand you,” Polly answered, straightforwardly, and without coloring. “My clothes are shabby, and you're trying to tell me that I will have to get better ones.”

“That's to be charged to expense account, Polly.”

“Then I shall go very lightly,” she assured him.

“If you do you'll ruin the business at the outset, little one! You've simply got to have nice clothes, or how can you look at your best? Don't be afraid because the bank account is a small one; there'll be more money there with it soon.”

“It won't cost much,” she smiled. “I always had to make my own clothes, and in the summer time a few dollars will go a long way when a girl is her own dressmaker.”

“But I don't want a few dollars to go a long way,” Ted pleaded, earnestly. “Polly, by degrees, I want you to be the smartest-dressed young lady around here. Start right, won't you——”

“Dear?” he had almost said, but he checked himself in time.

“Then the unknown, mysterious business that I'm going into really calls for nice clothes, does it?” she asked seriously.

“It honestly does, Polly.”

“Then I'll follow orders,” she laughed, brightly.

“Just go out presently and get the things you want, and learn how to write checks, won't you?” he whispered, as he held her hand for an instant at the foot of the hotel staircase.

“Yes, I will, Ted.”

And Polly ran lightly upstairs, humming as she went. As for Ted Torrant, he walked into the deserted hotel office and straight up to a mirror.

There the young rascal actually winked at his own reflection.

“Perhaps there are slicker ways of making a nice, straightforward girl accept all the help she needs,” he muttered. “But if there really are any slicker ways I haven't heard of them.”

Then he wheeled, straightening up, as Don Gleason strolled into the office.

“Through with the other business?” asked Don, quietly.

“I'm ready for the next business,” retorted Ted, quickly. “And now, Don, old fellow, get your nerve together again. We've got to take our lives in our hands before the day's over.”

“You're going after the reward business, ain't you?”

“We're going after the rewards, Don, old chap, but we have to get at the rewards by walking through the razor-backs themselves. And now we're off on that job!”

CHAPTER VIII.

TALKING BUSINESS WITH THIEVES.

“Ye're wastin' yer time with us. We ain't no squealers!” growled Shang Lannigan.

“We don't talk,” snorted Whitley, the negro.

These two had been rounded up in Bridgetown the night before, after the police had received Ted's tip over the telephone.

Now our hero and Don, having come over to Bridge-

town, had been allowed by the police to see these two razorbacks.

The men had been up in court that morning, and had been remanded back to jail until the police could secure more evidence.

That evidence Ted and Don were now prepared to give, both youngsters being able to swear, positively, that they had seen the prisoners at the big house on the hill the night before.

"Now, you fellows have been stealing a lot of plunder all summer, and selling it," Ted insisted. "I'm just about ready to fasten it all on you, too. If you let this thing go too far, and force me to bring too much evidence against you, you'll just about have to spend the rest of your days behind bars. Now, the police have agreed that, if you'll say where all the stolen stuff is, they'll press just one charge against each. That way you'll get only a few years apiece. The other way you will probably never be free men again. Is it hard for you to choose?"

"There ain't nothin' to choose," Shang retorted, doggedly.

"But think it over, man. If you're behind bars the rest of your days you'll never be able to enjoy a minute of life. Now, all we want is to know where you sold the stuff you stole. Is it going to hurt you to tell, and to tell truthfully? Is it going to hurt you as much as it will to spend your days rotting in a cell, as you're doing at this minute? Come, now! Be sensible!"

"Nothin' doing," sniffed Shang.

"Nothin' sayin'," added Whately.

"But—"

"Oh, shut up!" roared Shang. "I tell ye, there's nothin' doing."

"All right, then; we'll find out without your help, and let you go up for life," Ted retorted.

He turned as if to leave, and, as he did so, followed by Don, Shang growled after them.

"We'll go up and do time, an' welcome, but you kids will be sorry ye ever butted in. The rest of the gang's loose."

"They won't be long," Ted answered, halting.

"Oh, we've got friends all over the country. You'll hear from 'em," Shang promised, with cheerful grimness.

"Get anything out of 'em?" inquired the Bridgetown chief of police, as the youngsters came upstairs from the cell-room.

"Not a whisper," sighed Ted.

"Thought you wouldn't. We've been at 'em all morning, but they're game. They'll take their medicine, and go up for long terms, but they won't pass any tips."

"You keep 'em tight," promised Ted, "and we'll find enough more screws to put on 'em."

"What are you boys going to do now?" the chief wanted to know.

"Well," Ted smiled, "I guess we'll have to follow the Hyman & Wells Circus, too."

"Going to turn razorbacks?" laughed the chief.

"We're going to find out just what they're doing," Ted declared, stoutly. "And we're going to break that gang up by getting them nabbed one at a time, if we have to go that slow. By the way, chief, you can do something for us if you'll give us a card to the other chiefs of police, stating that we're proving of the greatest help to the authorities in running down these pests."

The Bridgetown chief quickly made out and signed such a card, which Ted pocketed for future use.

"The show'll be over at Waverly to-day," Ted went on. "So I reckon that'll likely be our address until tomorrow."

"Look out, boys," warned the chief. "You're fooling with gunpowder, you know."

"So are the razorbacks," Ted laughed, unconcernedly.

That afternoon found the boys in the little city of Waverly, where the big tents of the Hyman & Wells were up, and sheltering a big afternoon audience.

To save time the youngsters had eaten lunch on the train.

"And now the first thing to do," Ted hinted, as the two boys stood on the platform, "is to roam the town, and see how many members of the gang we can name from their descriptions."

"Be sure they've got our descriptions, too," smiled Don. "They'll know us in the same minute that we know them."

"They won't see us."

"What are you talking about, Ted?"

"Facts. I'm going to show you a slick way of roaming the town without being seen."

Ted led the way to the back of the railway station. There he had a brief but earnest talk with an honest-looking cab-driver.

Don had already gotten inside the vehicle, and Ted soon followed him.

Slam! Down came one of the cab's curtains, then the other.

"What's that for?" Don queried.

Smiling, Ted used his knife-point to make a few tiny holes through the fabric of the curtain.

"Do I follow suit on my side?" queried Gleason.

"Yes."

When the cab rolled away a moment later the boys were invisible behind cab curtains, but each was looking out on his side of the street.

Inside of half an hour, on a side street in the better residence section, the hidden boys located a pair of trampish-looking fellows who answered to Dromus's description of two of the razorbacks.

The fellows were strolling along the street, looking at the houses as if making selections for the night's work.

Two sharp pulls at the check strap, and the cab horses jogged along faster, turning the first corner.

Now the driver made his horses move rapidly until a policeman was encountered.

To the policeman Ted dropped an eager word.
That officer telephoned to his chief.

Within ten minutes the razorbacks had been craftily gathered in and locked up as suspicious characters.

"See if we can't get another bunch," throbbed Don, as soon as the news of the capture came back over the telephone.

"I'm to get in and ride with you, if you don't mind," hinted the policeman.

"Come along," Ted invited, hospitably.

It was an hour before the mysterious cab rolled into the tracks of another pair of razorbacks.

But at last Ted pointed out a pair, who, according to Dromus' tale, were "porch-climbers," or "second-story workers"—men who commit burglaries on an upper floor while the family are at supper.

"Hey, you men!" roared the officer, leaping out of the cab with his pistol drawn. "Up with your hands, or take lead! No nonsense!"

Astounded, the razorbacks surrendered. The officer rapped for help, and got it from citizens.

The cab went on.

But news travels quickly among criminals when a raid is being made on them.

"It's no use going further," announced Ted, when they had rolled through the streets of Waverly for another hour without encountering a single suspected razorback. "The rascals have got the tip, and have taken to the woods."

"What's to be done now, then?" queried Don.

"Go into the woods after them," laughed Ted.

Don looked at his friend in some astonishment.

"See here, Ted, don't get dippy. You're not a policeman, and you've no call to run your face against a gun. Do you really mean that you're going into the woods?" persisted Don Gleason.

"Just that. Don, I really believe that some of the razorbacks are hiding in the woods at present. There's only one big bit of woods near this town, and that's where I'm going. But you're not."

"Think I'm afraid?" flared his chum.

"Of course you're not. But one fellow ought to be able to get through the woods on the quiet, where two'd make a noise and get found out. So you go down to the Samoset House, that we passed, and I'll get the driver to leave me where I want to be left. I'll join you a little later on."

Five minutes later Ted Torrant slid out of the cab at the edge of the woods. He slipped in behind the nearest bushes, then watched the cab bear his chum away.

These woods stretched along the road for a quarter of a mile or so, with a depth of less than an eighth of a mile.

It took Ted some time to get through these woods without showing himself to possible lurkers, but at last he accomplished it.

"Wasted time, I reckon," he muttered, at last. "Wherever the razorbacks are, they're not lurking here. Maybe they thought the cops would be too likely to round up these woods."

Hot and perspiring, Ted sat down in a clump of bushes at the further end of the woods.

He was close to the road, which he could see from his place of concealment.

"Someone coming," he murmured, at last, with a sudden start of curiosity, as he heard the trudge of feet beyond on the dusty road.

He waited until two men came into sight on the road.

"Gracious!" throbbed the boy. "The last two fellows I expected to see here. By all rights they're still locked up!"

None other were the approaching men than Messrs. Slimey and Twitch!

They were grimy, dust-covered, shambling—in a word, they looked dog-tired, as if they had come far.

Ted crouched on his heels, balancing himself with his finger-tips.

"Hello!" he challenged, smilingly, as he rose almost within arm's reach of the pair.

Much as if they had seen a ghost did Messrs. Slimey and Twitch look.

They started back, staring in fright, then glowering suddenly.

"You again, is it?" demanded Twitch, letting a short club fall from his sleeve into his right hand.

Slimey tried to speak, but no words came. A short club, though, came out of his sleeve into his twitching right hand.

"Let's do him sure!" growled Twitch.

That rascal took a quick step forward, and Smiley also gathered himself for the spring.

But Ted, coolly and still smiling, motioned them back.

"Don't do anything rash," he advised calmly. "You'll only be jugged in ten seconds if you do. I've got people all around here, or I wouldn't be taking chances standing still. Get back a couple of steps, and we'll see if we've any need to quarrel to-day."

Ted's impudent self-assurance carried the day where nothing else could have saved him from a desperate rough-and-tumble fight in which he would have stood small show.

"What do you want, anyway?" growled Twitch.

"A little information—that's all," laughed Ted, easily. "In the first place, what do you mean by being here? I left you behind bars?"

"Bars weren't strong enough," smiled Twitch, grimly.

"You broke jail, eh?"

"Something like that," grunted Twitch Grundy.

"And you don't want to go back, eh?"

"What do you mean?" snarled Twitch, gripping his short club tighter.

"Why, as you're no fool, of course you don't want to go back to jail."

"Meaning you're likely to squeal on us?"

"I may not have to," Ted returned, coolly. "Now, I've got something to tell you, and a hint or two to offer. In the first place, of course you're on your way to tail the Hyman & Wells show."

"If you know, kid, there ain't no use telling you."

"Lie low, then," Ted hinted. "It's hard times with the razorbacks just now. Some of 'em got jugged this afternoon. Two more got jugged last night, down at Bridgetown. Every one of 'em will be behind bars as fast as the cops can handle 'em."

"That sounds nice!" sneered Twitch.

"Oh, I'm not fool enough to ask you to believe me," Ted assented, good-naturedly. "You'll hear all about it when you reach your crowd. They're dead scared, and roosting high. Maybe you won't be able to find any of 'em just now. But every one of 'em's spotted, and every one is to be nabbed. You'll be, yourselves, as soon as you step on the town's streets. That is, unless I make it easy for you."

"Come right to the point," cried Twitch. "Tell what you're doping at by this hot air."

"You go into town," nodded Ted, "and I'll fix it easy for you. The cops will have the tip, and won't molest you as long as you don't do anything irregular. If you do happen to get jugged, send for me at the Samoset House, and I reckon I can smooth things for you."

"Mighty good, ain't you?" demanded Twitch, suspiciously.

"Yes, and I've got a reason for it."

"What?"

"I want you two," announced Ted, "to help me out. If you do I'm going to make the police go easy on you. Your razorbacks who went first with the Dromus show, and later with the Hyman & Wells, have stolen an unusually fat lot of booty this season. What I want you two to do is to find out the names and addresses of the fences that the stuff was sold to."

"Is that all?" sneered Twitch.

"It isn't so much as you think it is," Ted argued. "You fellows have sold the stuff and got your money. If you bring me the names I want, the fences will have to give up the stuff they've bought of you, but that won't cost you anything. If you two fellows don't help me out I'm going to see you jugged for a long time. Now, do you want to go behind bars for twenty years or so?"

Twitch and Slimey glanced keenly at each other.

"You don't—that's right," nodded Ted, without waiting for either to speak. "Boys, the razorback industry will be on the blink the rest of this season. You two have a chance to get out with whole skins. That's by going in town, talking with your gang, and getting a good idea of who the fences are. Then come and tell me to-night, and I'll see that the police let you off easy. You won't try any roots on me, will you? For let me tell you, boys, that you can't skip town without being jugged. It's strictly between you and me—but you can't imagine how many men are looking for your whole crowd now."

Again Slimey and Twitch exchanged significant glances.

"Well, what do you say?" Ted wanted to know.

"You'll act dead square with us, won't you?" Twitch demanded, in a low voice.

"If you are with me, boys."

"Then maybe we'll help you," Twitch Grundy admitted, reluctantly.

"That isn't enough. Say that you will help me. Say that you'll meet me after dark and give up all the tips I've called for."

"We will, then," promised Twitch, slowly, "provided we can get the tips. But where'll we meet you? Not in town! Have you got the nerve, kid, to say we'll meet here?"

"Here as well as anywhere," Ted agreed, coolly.

"And you won't play no roots on us?"

"I'll use you both square, if you do as much for me."

"Then we'll meet here—at eleven to-night," promised Twitch.

"Good! But keep your word. Don't try to scoot out of town."

"We'll be here."

"Good-by, then, until eleven o'clock."

Ted smiled as he watched them out of sight.

But Twitch, as soon as he was sure he was past being seen, turned and shook his fist wrathfully.

A gleam of treachery shone in the fellow's eyes.

CHAPTER IX.

CAUGHT IN THE TRAP.

"Now, where's that kid?"

It was late at night, and Twitch, as he halted with Slimey on the dark road through the woods, put that question aloud.

"Right here, Twitch!" called a laughing voice down the road.

"That you, Torrant?"

"Ted Torrant—on deck!"

And Ted, stepping forward out of the concealment of bushes, met the pair on the road.

"Well," glowered Twitch, "you see, we kept our promise."

"By coming here—yes," nodded Ted.

"What do you mean by that?" demanded Twitch, harshly.

"I mean to ask whether you've kept the rest of the promise? Have you brought the names and addresses of the fence who bought the stolen loot from your gang?"

"Oh!" growled Grundy. "Maybe."

"That isn't an answer," Ted insisted firmly. "Now, see here, boys, it's best to be square with me. In town you found out just what I told you—that the razorbacks are being nabbed quick. You weren't touched. So you can see I've been acting square. Now you've simply got to do the same thing."

"Do you mind sitting down to talk it over?" asked Grundy, pointing to the grass at the edge of the road.

"I can talk standing just as well," Torrant retorted, briefly.

"You ain't afraid to sit down, are you?"

"No," Ted rejoined, dropping to a seat on the ground.

Twitch, too, seated himself, his eyes sharply, closely, on our hero.

Flop! Down out of Grundy's right sleeve dropped a revolver, the muzzle now turned on Ted.

"Don't try to get up again," advised Twitch, grimly.

"Oh, that's a foolish move," Ted remonstrated, though he felt an inward jolt of alarm.

"Why is it foolish?" Twitch wanted to know.

"Because you don't suppose I was fool enough to come here without help waiting to be called."

"Where are they?" Twitch Grundy questioned, smiling broadly. "Slimey, look around and see if you can find anybody."

"I'll call my friends, if you insist," bluffed Ted. "But I'd rather not. I promised to act on the square, you know, and so did you."

"Oh, we're going to be tremendous square," promised Grundy, with a gruff laugh. "We ain't going to kill you—just yet!—unless we catch you trying to swing around on to your feet."

"Tell him," nodded Slimey.

"Might as well," rejoined Twitch. "Well, then, kid, we know well enough that you was fool enough to come here without help. How do we know? Why, the razorbacks are taking a night off to-night, and we've watched these woods as a hen watches chicks. So we know that you came here alone, and that no one else is standing watch for you. That being the case, we fellows want to have a few words with you. Slimey, you know what to do now."

Ted started again inwardly, his eyes fast on Slimey Fettters.

But all that worthy did was to go off down the road at a rather crisp walk.

So Ted turned to look again at the scoundrel who held the gun on him so coolly.

"Twitch Grundy," Ted demanded, "are you and Slimey going back on your word? Are you going to throw away the last chance you had for your freedom?"

"Nothing saying just now," Grundy drawled. "Wait, and you'll hear it all at once."

"But, see here——"

"If you know when you're well off," broke in Twitch, warningly, "you will shut up on the jump."

There was something so ugly in this command from the fellow who held a gun that Ted bit his lips.

Letting his glance rove in the direction taken by the vanishing Fettters, Ted soon saw something to interest him immensely.

Slimey was heading back now, with two other down-at-the-heel looking wretches in his wake.

On came the trio, Ted eyeing them curiously.

Twitch volunteered no information, nor did he speak on any subject whatever.

But Grundy held the cocked pistol in his hand, watching as if he would hugely enjoy seeing the trapped boy make a move to get away.

Up to the spot Slimey marched his two companions.

Here they halted, the two newcomers eyeing the boy with lively interest.

"Know him?" demanded Twitch, without turning his head sideways to look at the two new ones.

"Yep," replied one of the pair.

"Ever see the kid before?"

"No; but the descrip holds good."

"It's Torrant," Twitch confirmed.

"The kid that's been doing us all dirt!"

"Do you know who these gentlemen are?" Grundy demanded of our hero.

"As well as if they had their name-plates on their vests," Ted retorted, dryly. "One is Buck Ginger, and the other is Scads Dolliver. I don't understand how they escaped the drag-net this afternoon."

"Well, we did," snarled Buck.

"And that's more than you've done to-night, kid!" grated Scads Dolliver.

"You fellows talk as if you were enjoying yourselves," remarked Ted, looking curiously at their faces in turn.

"Oh, we expect to," grimaced Slimey Fettters. "That's what we're here for."

"Pooh! Don't be fools any longer," cried Ted, impatiently. "If you want me to think you've got me in a tight box you can't do it. If I let out one yell——"

"It'll be your last remark in this world," finished Twitch, significantly.

"More rot!" jeered Ted.

"See here, kid," bubbled Slimey Fettters, eagerly, "just to show you we know you're bluffing! That town down below has five day policemen and seven night cops. The day cops are all at the show, on duty around the tents, and the night cops are out on post. There ain't a cop within a mile of here, as we know. Nor anyone else that could help you—'cause, having nothing else to do, we've been piping off these woods."

"They've got it down pat," quavered Ted, inwardly.

"Tell him what we're going to do with him, Twitch," urged Slimey Fettters.

"Shall I tell him now, fellows?" queried Twitch, without taking his eyes off the boy.

"Better," assented Buck.

"Tell him—and do it!" ground out Scads Dolliver.

"Well, then, Torrant," Grundy went on, "you've stirred up the gang by having six of us jugged and going after the rest. You'd orter known what kind of a crowd you was running down. We've got you down, instead, what's left of us. And you won't get up again."

"Going to keep me sitting here all night?" Ted demanded.

He spoke with cool, laughing impudence, but inside his heart seemed to be stopping with the dread that surged up within him.

"Tell him!" insisted Slimey.

Twitch looked as if he enjoyed his task as he spoke:

"Torrant, you've sown hornets' nests, so you've got to

reap stings. Our job to-night is to sting the last breath out of you for good! Jump him, fellows! Now!"

CHAPTER X.

IN THE NOISE OF BATTLE.

Ted Torrant was at this moment so near to being scared to death that it hardly needed violence to finish him.

Yet, if these brutes looked for a sign of his terror, it was because they did not understand the manner of boy with whom they had to deal.

For Ted, shaking inside though he was, managed, by a great effort to steady his voice and to laugh sneeringly.

"Funny, is it?" asked Twitch, grimly.

"Rather," Ted chuckled. "You'll see the joke soon, too!"

"You won't," Grundy informed him. "You're bluffing about having help at hand, but even if you had it it wouldn't do you any good. We may all have to sit in the electric chair for this job, but we're in it just the same. So bring on your friends, if you've got any loafing near. We'll finish you, anyway, before they get close enough to do you any good!"

"What's holding you back, then?" sneered our hero.

"Nothing," rejoined Twitch Grundy, rising. "Buck, slam the kid down on his back."

Buck, who had sprung in behind Ted Torrant, now gave the boy a twitch that sent him over flat on his back.

"Fall on him! Wind him up!" Twitch commanded, as if he were the foreman of a gang of ordinary workmen.

In another instant the order would have been obeyed.

But just at that second a sound came to their ears that made them jump in earnest.

Cr-r-r-r-rack! Crack! crack! crack!

Down the road, perhaps a quarter of a mile away, sounded a volley, followed by three scattering shots.

Now another volley and more loose shots.

"What on earth——" faltered Slimey, his voice and his knees shaking together.

"Cut the kid's wind off, and we'll scoot," advised Twitch.

But still more shots rang out.

"You fellows better duck before you do anything here," Ted sputtered. "Shall I tell you what that is? Not cops, but armed citizens. And they are out to lynch to-night! They're tired of you fellows. They've just run into some of them down there. You heard the answer."

The shots had died out. All was still down the road.

But even Twitch, the coolest of the quartette, showed signs of the "rattles" now.

Ted, still all impudence, now sat boldly up.

"Better dust," he advised. "No; on second thought it wouldn't be wise. You can't tell where you'd run into more of the citizen's committee. The best thing you can do is to stay here with me."

Down the road the sounds of firing had died out, and now an awesome silence followed.

"Your friends have been wiped out, or the shooting wouldn't be over so soon," Ted grinned.

Cr-r-r-rack! Cr-r-r-rack!

This time Slimey Fettters fairly screamed.

Even Ted Torrant, the coolest of the five present, started and looked swiftly over his shoulder.

For these volleys came from up the road, in the opposite direction from the first shots.

"You see! You can't go either way without running into trouble," Ted declared. "You can't even cut across the woods. Now, you understand how well you fellows watched the woods to-night—or was it all bluff?"

Twitch and his friends looked dumfounded enough.

"Now, no more nonsense," snapped Ted. "Not a bit unless you want to run into the lynchers, who are so sore against your crowd that they won't stop at anything. Twitch, put that gun up for your own safety. I'm going to get up on my feet. Shoot—if you dare!"

Without more ado, Ted Torrant did leap to his feet.

Twitch raised his weapon as if to shoot.

But a solitary shot ringing out up the road stayed his hand.

"That's right, Twitch," Ted approved, coolly. "Now, put that gun down on the ground."

"What you talking about?" leered Twitch, scowling savagely.

"I know what I'm talking about," Ted insisted, coolly. "Put it down. I'm not going to tell you, either, why you'll wish you had. Put it down or take the consequences."

For a moment Twitch hesitated.

"Both parties will close in here mighty soon," Ted warned him. "It won't be wise to be found with any weapons in your hands. For the last time, put that gun down on the ground!"

Then Twitch Grundy obeyed.

"Back away from the gun," Ted commanded.

Again Twitch obeyed.

"Now, Slimey, put your weapons down there, too," rang Ted Torrant's steady voice.

"S'help me, I hain't got none," whined Fettters.

"You know best, of course," Ted returned, indifferent. "Only, if you happen to be found with anything wicked in your clothes, it'll go harder with you than it would if you didn't. Got anything evil to put down there, Slimey?"

With a snort, Fettters drew out a dirk and a small bulldog revolver. He laid them on the ground beside Twitch's pistol.

"You get a knife, Twitch?" asked Ted, curiously.

"I don't carry one," Grundy replied.

"Buck, put your contribution on the pile," Ted suggested.

A black-jack was all that Buck Ginger contributed.

"You know best whether that's all you've got, Buck," Ted hinted.

Scads Dolliver now lay a pistol and a black-jack down beside the other weapons.

"The reason for taking up this collection," said Tom, coolly, "is that the citizens couldn't exactly kill an unarmed man. So, if any of you want to guess again, now's your chance, for I think I hear a posse moving this way."

Out of the woods came Don Gleason, white as chalk, but game to the core.

Smiling faintly, as Ted nodded to the little collection of weapons on the ground, Don bent over and picked them up.

Two of the pistols he handed to ready Ted, keeping the other himself.

"Now, hands up with you!" gruffed Ted Torrant. "We want you to march just ahead of us. Don't try to get too far ahead, either! And don't try to wheel on us! If you do either one of those things, you'll know what hot lead feels like. Buck and Twitch, you haven't got your hands up. No time for argument. Up go your hands instanter, or down goes your whole carcass! Now!"

Up went the hands, and now the lately exultant razor-backs were completely vanquished.

"March—toward town!" quavered Ted.

"What you going to do?" trembled Twitch, angrily. "Run us plumb into lynchers?"

"You won't meet any," jeered Ted. "There aren't any!"

Twitch gasped.

"But those shots?"

"Nothing but cannon crackers set off by my good friend, Don!" laughed Ted Torrant. "Was that slick—eh, boys?"

The quartette bunched and started down the road, so far strictly according to orders.

Yet our hero felt an uneasy, wavering conviction that ere they had gone far these ugly razor-backs would turn on him and Don.

"Ted! Ted! Wait! I'm coming, too!"

A swish of skirts up the road, and then a girlish figure bounded forward.

Could he be dreaming? Polly Brethnell!

With a deadly, dangerous fight on hand, our hero felt as if he were swooning when she darted in to add immensely to the terror and the danger.

CHAPTER XI.

"HEY, RUBE!"

Then he felt her trembling hand touch his sleeve.

"Polly, you foolish little girl!" Ted vented, despairingly.

"I'm here, Ted; make the best of it!" she whispered.

"I've got to," he groaned.

"I'm going to shoot, Buck, if you try to lag!" sounded Don's voice, cold and ugly. "Remember, we won't take a chance when we've got a woman here to defend."

Ted, too, had his eyes on the sullen quartette moving ahead, and he gripped both pistols ready to shoot.

"How did you come to be here, Polly?" Ted insisted, firmly.

"Why," she trembled happily, "I saw in the evening paper that you had turned detective."

"A detective, eh?" Ted smiled grimly.

"Well, the paper said you were anyway, so I didn't have to do much guessing," Polly went on, eagerly. "When I read that it gave me a thought. It occurred to me to come right down on the train and tell you that I understood the business at last, and was ready to do anything I could. So I got on the train and came right here to Waverly. That was where the paper said you were. And I saw Don at a window in the Samoset House, so I went in and got a room right next to yours."

"You traveled alone?" gasped Ted.

"No; I didn't quite dare to do that, so I got Mrs. Davis, Mr. Hopkins' sister, to come with me. She's at the Samoset House now. You see, we got the room right next to yours. The transom was a bit open between the two rooms. I—I suppose it wasn't just right; but I was so eager to know about the strange business that I—that I listened," Polly admitted in confusion.

"Did, eh?" Ted queried.

"So I heard you and Don planning how Don was to be watching in the woods, and that, if those dreadful men tried any mean tricks, Don was to slip off down the road and set off cannon crackers to make the rascals think there was a party of men out lynching."

"So?" insisted Ted, bound to have the whole of the story.

"So—oh, I suppose I did very wrong," Polly rambled on quickly, "but I was so anxious to do my share in the business. So I slipped out of the hotel and bought some cannon crackers. Then I asked the way to the woods, and I slipped up here early in the evening. And I—I didn't want either one of you to know I was here. So I went clear to the end of the woods and then hid. And then I waited."

"Waited there for hours?" gasped Ted.

"Yes; it seemed like—well, like months!" Polly admitted, candidly. "And all the time I wondered what was happening—or going to happen. And then, at last, I heard Don firing his cannon crackers down the road—and then I jumped up to do my share. My fingers shook so when I tried to light a pack—oh, it seemed as if I'd never get the crackers going! And now I'm afraid you think I did very wrong!"

"You saved the night, Polly, with those extra shots," Ted admitted. "You saved my life, too, probably—but, oh! I wish you hadn't come out here at all!"

"Why?" demanded Polly, in amazement.

"It staggers me to think what may happen to you, dear little girl, if these brutes ahead take it into their heads to turn and make a fight for it. Oh, Polly, I wish you were miles away."

"Slimey," rang Don's resolute voice, "I'm getting ready to kill you. Go straight."

"Isn't it exciting, being a detective?" throbbed Polly in Ted Torrant's ear.

"Polly, I'm not a detective."

"Then what are you?"

"Just a plain, every-day hustler, with a few ideas, Polly. One idea of mine was to gather in some of the rewards offered for recovering the stuff that these fellows have been stealing all along the route of a circus."

"Oh, Ted, if you really had to come out here to-night, why didn't you ask some of the police to come and hide close to you?" quivered the girl.

"Why? For the best reason in the world, Polly. So that the police wouldn't help and then jump in and claim all of the rewards that I'm out to get. What's that? Hush, dear!"

Ted's voice shook in terrified earnest now.

For ahead on the road were other dark forms, and trouble was brewing.

"Who's that coming?" gruffed a voice from down the road.

"Clear the road ahead!" rang out Don Gleason's voice ere Ted could speak. "We're a posse with razorbacks for prisoners!"

"Razorbacks?" yelled an ugly voice.

"That you, Sanders?" roared Twitch Grundy in the next jiffy.

"It's me all right, Twitch!"

"Then sail in with your crowd! We're stuck up in front of guns by two kids and a girl! Hey, Rube!"

In a twinkling from the crowd down the road came the angry answering bellow:

"Hey, Rube! Hey, Rube!"

Ted groaned, turning as white as a sheet as he heard the oncoming rush of feet.

"Stick close to me, Polly. Don't try to run," he ordered as he raised the pistols that he carried.

CHAPTER XII.

CONCLUSION.

Then Ted Torrant's voice rang out like that of a general who has taken command in battle:

"Don't one of you razorbacks try to bolt—for your lives! Back, you rubes!"

"Scatter your fellows into the woods, Sanders!" yelled Twitch Grundy, hoarsely. "Then you can get 'em on the flank!"

Crack! It was Don's pistol. He fired past Twitch's ear.

"That's the business!" yelled Ted, approvingly. "I'm going to get in the game, too, if another razorback stirs or talks!"

What was that down the road?

As Sanders and his mates scattered into the woods on either side there sounded the fast pounding of hoofs.

"Who yelled 'Hey, Rube' here?" demanded a sharp voice as a man in a buggy pulled up just ahead. "Stop

it! I won't have any rows here! Johnson, bring up your crew on the run!"

"Don't you try to run!" warned Ted, darting forward and holding a pistol close to Twitch.

"You stay here!" ordered Don, getting between Buck and Scads.

Thus the boys held their prisoners, with the aid of several circus men who had stopped to aid them.

As for the first circus men, who had given the "Hey, Rube!" yell, they were now wildly beating through the woods to safety.

But canvasmen and hostlers, riders and gymnasts, jockeys and animal trainers—all the men of the Hyman & Wells Circus, were now in hot chase of the trouble-makers.

"Are these police prisoners?" demanded a man who had jumped out of the buggy and run forward.

"Razorbacks we're trying to take in and turn over to the police," Ted replied, eyeing his questioner sharply.

The man looked the quartette of prisoners over carefully.

"I know three of 'em," he nodded. "Young man, I'm Hyman, of the circus. Some people seem to think that we encourage these razorbacks, thugs and thieves to travel with us. The truth is that every reputable circus man does all he can to down such characters. But we simply can't stop their following our shows. The only thing we can do is to carry skilled detectives with us to spot these fellows and turn 'em over to the police. I've got two detectives joining day after to-morrow. Are you young men employed by detectives?"

"No," smiled Ted. "We're anything but detectives. This is a little private idea of our own, but it seems to have panned out well."

"I'll drive back alongside to see that my men take your prisoners to the police station," promised Hyman, in an aside to our hero.

The line of march was taken up past the long line of wagons and animal cages of a circus on its march to the railway.

Waverly was asleep as the little party moved through the streets.

But at the police station the chief was on hand and glad enough to receive his prisoners.

"That's all I can do for you, I believe," suggested Mr. Hyman when he had seen Twitch and Slimy, Buck and Scads turned over to the police inside the station-house.

"I can never tell you how grateful we are," Ted replied, earnestly.

Don was already away, escorting Miss Polly to the hotel and back under the sheltering wing of Mrs. Davis.

"The gratitude is all on my side, I guess," clicked Mr. Hyman, as he thrust one hand down into a trousers pocket.

He brought forth a massive roll of bills, unwrapping two of one hundred dollars each from the outside.

"This is the least I can do for you young men," ex-

plained the circus proprietor. "I'm doing everything in my power to drive razorbacks away from the show, and I'll spend any amount of money to do it."

Ted hesitated about accepting money from a man who had helped him so fully, but Hyman insisted.

Don came back after a little. He and Ted were allowed to question the prisoners, one at a time, in the guard-room.

All four were badly demoralized now.

Singly they confessed to smaller crimes and named the fences (receivers of stolen goods) to whom the loot had been sold.

When all had been questioned in turn and Ted had written down the information he had secured, he turned to the chief:

"I guess we might as well have them all brought in again, one at a time. Suppose, we begin with Slimey."

Fetters was brought in. All the little bravado was gone out of that fellow now.

"Slimey," began Ted, genially, "I guess we've got most everything out of your crowd now. So you might as well go ahead and tell the rest that you know. The more you tell now the more you save the police from having to hunt up for themselves, the lighter sentence you're likely to get in court."

"What do you want to know, then?"

Then Ted Torrant opened his batteries of questions—the slickest questions imaginable.

In his terror Fetters told even more than our hero had expected.

The sun had been up two hours when Ted Torrant had finished questioning the razorbacks.

All of the stolen valuables had been sold by these razorbacks to notorious fences in New York.

"Back to the hotel now," flushed Ted, too excited and too well-satisfied to feel weariness.

Here he and Don went over the lists furnished by the thieves, comparing these with the lists furnished by people whose persons or houses had been robbed in the track of the Dromus Hippodrome.

"It calls for one of us to go to New York now and lay these lists before the police authorities there," explained Ted, looking up from his work at ten o'clock in the morning.

* * * * *

At the end of the second day Don telegraphed from New York:

"Police are recovering stolen property with a rush."

But this Ted already knew from his morning newspaper, for the running down of the razorbacks and the recovering of their loot had made sensations for the newspapers of the great metropolis.

The stolen property thus recovered amounted in value to more than two hundred thousand dollars.

The rewards alone totaled up to nearly thirty thousand dollars. Of this Ted secured some twenty-eight thousand.

Ted finally succeeded in making Don accept eight thousand of the total.

With the balance our hero had a very fair start in life. Through the summer Ted ingeniously found tasks for Polly to do. He kept her just busy enough with light tasks, such as copying, to make her think that she was really helping him in business.

But one evening in the early fall, as they strolled through the town, Polly came out strong with curiosity.

"Ted, when am I going to be more deeply employed in your business? It doesn't seem to me that I am doing much of anything."

"Why," laughed our hero, "I'm thinking, now that Bobo is so gentle and drives so well in harness, that I'll have you take him out every day for exercise."

Ted had tried hard to find Dromus and pay over to him a sum that would represent the full value of the splendid horse.

But that weak-eyed former circus man had completely disappeared.

"You've had me copying a lot of papers lately," went on Polly. "All about those horrible fellows who have just been sent to prison."

"Yes," laughed the boy. "All the razorbacks that we caught are now safely stowed away for the next few years."

"But what am I going to do now?" Polly persisted.

"Why, Polly Brethnell, I don't see a thing for you to do unless you take a partnership."

"A part—"

"You understand, don't you?" glowed Ted, catching her hand suddenly and looking straight into her eyes.

"I think I do," she replied, simply.

"Will you accept that partnership, Polly?"

"A great big 'yes,' Ted!"

They're still partners, and will be as long as they live.

But Don Gleason is Ted's business partner. The two young men now operate a famous stock farm, and doing famously well at it, too.

THE END.

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